What Strategies Would Increase Time-On-Task Behavior For Culturally And Linguistically Diverse Sixth-Grade Beginning Band Students?
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Abstract
How does one successfully teach a large group of culturally and linguistically diverse sixth graders to play musical instruments during the last eighty-five minutes of the school day? Can the students stay focused? In this paper, I will share how performance and non-performance activities improved student attention and time-on-task behavior over traditional band rehearsal techniques.

Rationale
Upon being hired as band director at Ellen Glasgow Middle School, I learned that part of my teaching assignment included teaching beginning band to sixth graders for eighty-five minutes a day. Since I was experienced in teaching beginning band at the elementary and middle school level, I felt very comfortable with this responsibility. However, I quickly learned that teaching at Glasgow would be quite different than teaching at any of my previous schools.

Glasgow Middle School has a vast population of cultures and socio-economic status. The 1,200 students speak 37 languages and represent 71 countries. 72% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. These factors certainly affect the learning environment in my classroom.

About sixty sixth-grade students begin study of a band instrument at Glasgow. Like students at my previous schools, their enthusiasm is very high at first. However, that enthusiasm begins to fade as they discover the learning process involves consistent practice and gradual, sequential learning. For my students at Glasgow, language barriers, and large class size also diminish the enthusiasm. Individual concerns are harder to address. This frustration leads to disinterest and lack of success. In the classroom, this is evidenced by off-task behavior. Since it is generally accepted that time on task is related to productivity and success, my research involves looking at strategies to engage students in learning to increase time on task.

Literature Review
When looking for articles to support my research question, I discovered that most of the literature focused on classroom management skills rather than actual activities or methods. I didn’t believe these articles would really give me helpful solutions to my question. Finally, I discovered two articles that gave me much to consider. “Improving Student Motivation and Performance in Music Programs” by Eric Caliendo and Renae Kopacz (1999) and “Increasing Student Music Achievement through the Use of Motivational Strategies” by Louis A. Vega
(2001) described action plans incorporated in real classrooms with positive results.

“Improving Student Motivation and Performance in Music Programs" described Caliendo’s and Kopacz’s research performed in their middle school music classrooms. In school #1, the classroom consisted of mostly white students (74.4%) with low percentages of low-income students (4.1%) and limited English proficiency students (4.1%). The surrounding community was of middle to upper class income, professional, family-oriented, and living in single-family homes, condominiums, or apartments. In school #2, the classroom closely resembled the student body at my school, Ellen Glasgow Middle School. There was a diverse student population (Mexican/American – 50.3%, White – 33.5%, Black – 9.6%, Asian – 6.6%) with high percentages of low-income students (43.4%) and limited English proficiency students (43.4%). The surrounding community spoke sixty-six different languages, was of low to middle class income, and lived in single-family dwellings, duplexes and quadroplexes, and apartments. I focused on the action plan of this second classroom.

Caliendo and Kopacz directed the project in the following manner. First, they administered a Musical Attitude Survey and a Music Performance Pre-test at the beginning of their project. The results of the Musical Attitude Survey indicated that the students ranked themselves higher than what the average score for the Music Performance Pre-test indicated (79.6%).

Next, three different strategies were used in the classroom as interventions– listening to professional recordings, student – directed sectional work, and student self-critique. The listening component required the class to rehearse a piece of music first, then listen to and discuss a professional recording of the same. This enforced critical listening to the recordings, as well as their own performance. It also built a strong base of musical terminology and technique.

Student-directed sectional work allowed sectional leaders to conduct small-group rehearsals on sections suggested by the band director and invited individual students to the podium to hear how the ensemble sounded. After both activities, students completed an assessment rubric. This permitted the students to believe that their efforts made a difference in the group performance. Thus, students had a greater connection and motivation to learn the music.

Finally, the students critiqued themselves through the use of videotaped rehearsals (this portion of the project was named “Lights, Camera, Action”). Based on comments students wrote on a Reflection Sheet, a discussion followed and the piece of music was performed again, this time with the discussion points in mind.

The third phase of the project required the researchers to analyze the results. Analysis showed a positive impact of the three strategies on student motivation and performance. After listening to a professional recording, student comments became more detailed and in-depth. Students also wanted to emulate the recordings. Student cohesiveness and listening skills improved with student-directed sectionals. The videotaped rehearsal indicated that students were hearing things they normally didn’t hear because they were listening more
objectively and that they were making connections from the discussions of the music/rehearsal to their performance.

After the intervention stage, Caliendo and Kopacz re-administered the Musical Attitude Survey and Music Performance Test. The survey indicated an increased student awareness of full effort and potential while the average score of the test increased to 90.2%.

Final conclusions and recommendations showed improved musical performance and more cohesiveness among the group. If possible, the researcher should find a recording of the exact band arrangement that is being studied in class, provide more time for sectionals to work on all band pieces instead of just one piece, and make sure good equipment and space is available for videotaping.

The second article, “Increasing Student Music Achievement through the Use of Motivational Strategies” by Louis A. Vega (2001) attempted to improve student motivation and achievement through the use of multiple intelligences, authentic assessment, technology, and positive teacher feedback. Once again, the focus group resembled my class at Ellen Glasgow Middle School. This class consisted of seventh-graders who exhibited low levels of motivation and achievement, were culturally diverse (Black – 52.2%, White – 37.6%, Hispanic – 7.3%, Asian/Pacific Islander – 2.5%, and Native American -.4%), were low-income (40.2%), and had limited English proficiency (3.6%).

Vega cited four causes for poor student motivation and achievement. Student-based music factors included biased and set music preferences, lack of development and confidence in personal non-instrumental skill, and lack of desire to develop instrumental music skills. Student-based non-music factors focused on low student self-esteem, disillusionment, boredom, and negative social and peer influences. Family-based factors were dysfunctional family units, lack of parental relationships and support, poverty, and poor medical care and nutrition. The last factor, school-based factors, incorporated lack of individualized and modified instruction, normative standards, teacher prejudice, high teacher control, and low level uniform assignments with minimal extrinsic and intrinsic reward.

Vega conducted the project action plan in this manner. A pre-student survey and observation checklist was administered during the first week. The survey pointed to low student musical interest and many off-task behaviors. During the next eight weeks, students worked with partners in the Music in Education Lab (MIE) and Music and Technology Lab with General Education Communicators (GEC). Procedures focused on multiple intelligence activities with authentic assessment tools (student journal entries, learning log entries, self-reflections, and individual goal setting) and rubrics. Midi software (software that allows for the composition and playback of music) was utilized. Teacher feedback was provided with a three-column sheet and instant feedback via headphones used with the GEC network. Weekly music lessons were presented on topics including keyboard exploration, major pentachords, music fundamental drills, song repertoire, music composition, and performance. At the end of the
intervention stage, a post-student survey and observation checklist was re-administered.

The results of the project were similar to those results of the Caliendo and Kopacz project. The pre-survey and observation checklist pointed to low student musical interest and many off-task behaviors. Student journal entries were longer in the beginning of the project and shorter but more specific to the students’ personal opinions and learning experiences toward the end. The learning logs reflected a decline of song repertoire completion throughout the project (100% to 79%). There was higher participation in partner groups than with individual student groups. Partners were found to be encouraging; and the students enjoyed playing with partners.

Vega derived various conclusions from his project. There were several elements of the project that seemed to increase student motivation and achievement. Keyboard synthesizer lessons increased student engagement, interest, and motivation. It also aided in the technology strategy. The same result was found with the music software, piano/technology video, and picture soundpiece lessons. Immediate teacher feedback was effective in improving student motivation and effort. In general, music technology was found to be the most effective and preferred motivator and achievement builder since it addressed multiple intelligences. There were also several conclusions that suggested why students might be less motivated. Traditional methods of learning music through music literacy seemed to only generate moderate student interest and motivation. Pentachord song repertoire was challenging for students already experiencing difficulty in basic skills. Some students had difficulty writing original lyrics to pre-composed songs because they did not possess the creative writing experience. Vega agreed with Caliendo and Kopacz that students are not as easily motivated by academic expectations. They are more motivated if they believe the learning outcome would be successful.

Vega made the following recommendations after his project. A teacher must consider the vast amount of time required to research and prepare lessons that reflect multiple intelligences. Students must be allowed to work in groups or with partners and have enough time to complete the learning tasks. Finally, the teacher must give appropriate feedback to students in a timely manner.

Methods

I decided to implement strategies with my two sixth-grade beginning band classes. The “Red Day Band” consisted of thirty beginning woodwind students studying flute, clarinet, or alto saxophone. The “Blue Day Band” consisted of twenty-one beginning brass/percussion students and eight intermediate band students (one flute, three clarinets, two alto saxophones, one trumpet, and one baritone).

Knowing that I had these classes at the end of the day, I tried to select a variety of intervention activities that would appeal to a variety of interests. These strategies included written assignments that were grouped in units based on music fundamentals, writing stories and drawing pictures that went along with the music we were performing or listening to in class, recording student performance,
student-led sectional time, and reading articles from "MusicAlive!" magazine. I also enlisted the help of one of the elementary band directors within my pyramid who had been assigned to assist me on Friday afternoons. Finally, I asked the band director from the neighboring middle school to observe me teaching one of these classes.

My four-week schedule for intervention was as follows:

**Week 1:**
- Pre-student survey (Appendix A)

**Week 2:**
- Record students – Students rehearsed their assignments in their sectional groups. Then I would record their performance of the music. When listening to the recording, students were instructed to listen for one good thing and one thing that could be improved. A brief discussion of the students’ comments followed.
- Written music fundamental units – Worksheets were collated into units of study (music symbols, note naming, time signatures, and, accidentals) and kept in folders within the classroom for students complete.
- Use of additional instructor – A band director from one of my elementary feeder programs was assigned to assist me on Friday afternoons. Since I have a rotating schedule, she would help me with different classes every Friday. I would send small groups of students to work with her in another room while I worked with the remaining students.

**Week 3:**
- Writing stories/drawing pictures about the songs we were studying – I played a recording of a composition my Symphonic Band was preparing for an upcoming concert, “A Day at the Zoo” by James Curnow. I explained that the composition was divided into five movements. Four of the movements represented different animals in the zoo (I – Introduction, II – Birds, Butterflies, and Things that Crawl, III – Elephants and Monkeys, IV – The Aquarium, V – Lions, Tigers and Bears). After listening to the music, students wrote a story or drew a picture about one of the movements. If the student chose to write a story, their story had to be descriptive (What did the animals look like? What were the animals doing? How were the spectators reacting to the animals? What sounds did they hear or smells did they smell?). If the student chose to draw a picture, the picture had to fill the entire page and be as detailed as possible.
- Reading an article from “MusicAlive!” magazine – We read an article, “Tunes for 'Tunes: A Look at Music's Role in Cartoons” (Music Alive! March 2003; pages 4-5) aloud. In the Red class, each student would read one paragraph as I called out student names. In the Blue class, students read the article individually or in pairs as I rotated around the room to rehearse sections. After reading the article, we watched a short videotape of a Tom and Jerry cartoon and discussed the music and sound effects used.
• Use of additional instructor

**Week 4:**

• Observation by neighboring middle school band director – This colleague noted student behaviors as I was conducting class and also provided suggestions and insights.

• Student-led sectionals – I assigned students to small homogeneous groups and chose one student to serve as section leader. Students worked in separate practice rooms on an assigned musical exercise. Expectations were:
  1) Section leaders - counting off for the group, explaining what musical element needed to be improved and suggesting how the group would go about improving it, and providing a short narrative afterward describing exactly what was done during the sectional.
  2) Students - respecting the section leader, working as a team, and following the section leaders suggestions.

• Use of additional instructor

  My Red band class students are very similar in ability and study the same exercises. In contrast, my Blue band class varies in ability a great deal and studies different exercises. Therefore, I decided to handle the interventions differently in each class. Generally, during the Red class, I would rehearse with the class as a large group for forty to forty-five minutes. Then I would spend the remainder of the time using one of the interventions. During the Blue class, I would present the intervention at the beginning of the class (using an overhead projector to demonstrate written assignments). Students would continue working with the intervention as I rotated around the room working with small groups. At the end of class, we would check, discuss, or share the assignment as a wrap-up.

**Findings**

I was quite pleasantly surprised at the outcomes of this action research project! Note that some of the percentages do not add up to 100% because I disregarded some students’ answers. Some students circled more than one answer or did not circle any answer at all.

Results from the pre-survey (Appendix A) indicated that 66% of the students enjoyed rehearsing as a full ensemble while 34% preferred rehearsing in sections. 7% favored written music assignments, 43% favored writing stories or drawing pictures of music we were learning, and 48% favored reading the "MusicAlive!" magazine as alternate class activities. More than half (58%) of the class liked working with another instructor in a practice room and a similar amount (59%) liked working with another student separately. The vast majority of students (71%) enjoyed recording and listening to their rehearsal while the same percentage of students said they were glad they chose to be in band class
this year. 46% of the class said they were planning on being in band class next year as a seventh-grader.

When students were recorded during rehearsal, they treated it much like a performance. Posture was straighter, attention was more focused, and bodies were still. Consequently, performance of the musical exercise improved. Discussion of the recording began with very generic comments (“We sounded good.” “We were not together.”). With my prompting, comments became more specific and used more musical terminology (“We played with dynamics.” “Our rhythm was together.”). During the next few classes, one student even brought his walkman to class to record rehearsal and play it at home for his family!

Since written musical units (Appendix B) received the lowest percentage on the pre-survey, it is appropriate that this activity had the least time-on-task. Particularly in the Blue group, I noticed that I stopped instruction more frequently to address talking, students out of their seats, and students throwing paper to each other. There were not as many musical exercises passed off (performed well enough to show understanding of the musical exercises so that new exercises could be assigned) during this activity and the quality of performance was decreased. My frustration level and the students’ boredom reached an all-time high during this intervention. In contrast, this intervention was slightly more successful with the Red group because we completed the assignments as a group. There was some talking, but there were no problems with students leaving their seats or throwing paper.

The most efficient use of rehearsal time was made when my colleague and I divided and rotated groups of students. Students were more focused by being in a smaller group. As an instructor, I was able to work on smaller details without feeling like I needed to keep the pace up to maintain the attention of the rest of the class. There was less boredom experienced by the students and less frustration experienced by the instructor. All of these factors contributed to greater success for the students (more exercises were passed off, more problems were solved, more questions were answered).

The most time-on-task for any intervention occurred when students were writing a story or drawing a picture for a piece of music that was being studied in the band program. Students quickly set to work and the room remained silent for thirty minutes. The only students who were out of their seats were those who were getting up to get extra sheets of paper or to sharpen pencils. The writings and drawings were very detailed and students did not seem to rush through the work “just to get it done”. In one story, a student described the fish in the aquarium as “…a rainbow, but underwater” (Appendix C). There were many drawings of elephants and monkeys, but only one student drew the animals from a rear view – an entirely different perspective (Appendix D). When it was time to share their work, students were very eager to volunteer.

Time-on-task varied between the Red and Blue groups when the “MusicAlive!” magazine was read. By reading as a group, the Red class had more time-on-task. Students sat still, there was less talking and more listening, and they were able to discuss the article afterward. In contrast, the Blue group required more of my attention. Since the reading was more of an
individual/paired activity, there was more movement in their seats, more
distraction, and less discussion of the article afterward. Both classes were very
attentive when watching the “Tom and Jerry” cartoon video.

The observation of my Red class by my colleague did not quite begin as I
had anticipated. The class was fifteen minutes late starting due to an
unexpected fire drill. By the time all the students had trickled in and assembled
their instruments, there were sixty minutes left in the class. My colleague sat to
the side of my room and took notes as I conducted class. The students were
attentive and respectful during the observation. There were only minor incidents
of students talking or not participating that I needed to address. These incidents
disappeared quickly after I spoke to the student(s). The notes that my colleague
discussed with me afterward were very positive and reflected many of the same
concerns/incidents she experienced in her own beginning sixth grade band
(Appendix E).

The last intervention was student-led sectionals. Once again, there were
different results between the Red and Blue classes. The Blue class was the first
to try the intervention. Students set to work quickly in their separate areas and
worked as a team. There was no arguing with the student section leader and no
laziness on the part of any student because the teacher was not directly in the
room. Section leaders did an excellent job of isolating problem areas in the
music and working on them using strategies we used in class (clapping
troublesome rhythms, saying note names, and twizzling [fingering and tonguing
the part with out producing a sound]). Students worked quietly and patiently
without leaving their areas to ask to get a drink or go to the bathroom. I rotated
between each room to check on the progress of each section and answer
questions. After the twenty minute sectional, the class returned to the bandroom
and we rehearsed the assigned music as a large group. We ended class by
discussing the improvements that had been made in the music, those
improvements that still needed to be made, and the success of the activity.
Students asked if we could have a sectional rehearsal again during a future class
and switch leaders. I agreed.

Results from the post-survey (Appendix A) showed only slight variations
from the pre-survey. There was an even split between those students who
preferred rehearsing as a full group (50%) and those students who preferred
rehearsing in sectionals (50%). Writing stories or drawing pictures of songs
being studied in the band program became the favorite alternate activity with
45% of the students while reading the “MusicAlive!” magazines were preferred by
43% and written music assignments were preferred by 6%. 59% of the students
enjoyed working separately with a band teacher and 84% enjoyed working with
another student in a practice room. The percentage of students who favored
recording the rehearsal rose to 84%. The students stating that they were glad
they chose to be in band class remained at 71% while those stating that they
were planning on being in band class next year as a seventh grader dropped
slightly to 43%.
Analysis, Conclusions, Implications

The findings of my research provided me with valuable information that I will use to refine my teaching of future beginning sixth-grade band classes. I discovered that a traditional band rehearsal where students rehearse in a large group setting for an entire class and wait patiently in their seats when a director has to isolate a problem in the music is not the only type of rehearsal. Using various activities gave the students the variety they needed to maintain focus but kept the musical focus/reinforcement I wanted. Therefore, these short activities enabled the students to achieve more success. The classes as a whole passed off more musical exercises than the beginning sixth-grade band class the previous year and they presented a concert at the end of the school year.

Many of the interventions pointed to specific implications. Students express themselves and learn in different ways (Writing stories/drawing pictures). Small group instruction leads to improved learning and classroom management (Use of additional instructor). Students take ownership of their own learning (Recording rehearsals and Student-led sectionals).

Next year, I will refine and expand some of these interventions. I will replace the written musical assignment with basic music theory software. Students will still learn and reinforce music fundamentals, but they will probably enjoy doing it more in this format. The software will also enable me to keep track of and evaluate each student’s progress.

I will also continue using creative writing and visual art as a genre for the students to show their understanding of a musical work. However, I plan on involving the English and Art teachers of the students to reinforce principles they are learning in those classes (i.e. metaphors in English or symmetry in Art). Therefore, cross-curriculum instruction can be achieved.

Summary

This action research project provided vital information and an opportunity to expand my thinking when planning my band rehearsal. I know that thirty minutes is generally the maximum length of time for sixth grade student to focus on one activity at the end of the day. Students prefer activities that allow them to be creative and showcase their creativity. Technology really catches their attention! A complete, well-rounded rehearsal does not necessarily require students to sit in their seats and constantly play for a long period of time. Multiple musical activities enhance instruction, carry over into performance, and maintain student interest.

However, the most important result of my action research project was student motivation. During one of the later classes, I noticed that a student was bringing his own portable cassette recorder to class and recording our rehearsal. When questioned, he said that he liked to play the cassette at home for his family. During the 2001/2002 school year, only 15% of my beginning sixth grade band students continued with band in the seventh grade. During the current 2002/2003 school year, 43% of my beginning sixth-grade band students are continuing into seventh grade band! The enrollment is so significant that my band program will increase from three performing groups to four performing
groups next year! As a music teacher, I want to foster a love and appreciation of music. I believe that is happening through this research.

References