REFEREED ARTICLE

Moving Secondary Music Education Forward

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Abstract

Band pedagogy has become the dominant teaching approach found in secondary music education. Band pedagogy’s focus on meeting performance objectives in large ensemble contexts has created inflexible and teacher-centered learning environments. This paper seeks to examine the problematic aspects of band pedagogy being at the forefront of curriculum implementation, and to propose solutions for educators that better meet the needs and interests of students. To create a clear path forward for secondary music education, educators’ need to be open to informal pedagogical approaches, cultivate an awareness of their own positionality to the music curriculum, and embrace popular music practices.

Band pedagogy is a unique teaching approach that is specific to secondary music education. Typically, band pedagogy is teacher driven and focuses on building students’ skills so that performance objectives can be met in a large ensemble context (Regelski, 2020). While many teachers enjoy implementing band pedagogy, most are dissatisfied with current practices (McPhail & McNeill, 2019). Alternative pedagogical approaches can be implemented to create student-centered learning environments, but educators must change their mindset and begin pushing back against the cultural expectations and longstanding traditions of band pedagogy. Informal music pedagogy can provide flexibility for students and teachers by permitting large-group, peer, and individual learning opportunities, but it also requires teachers to transfer their musical skills and knowledge into new genres (Green, 2016). Popular music practices can create a sense of enjoyment and self-belief for students because they can pursue their own interests during class (Hallam et al., 2018). Educators’ being open to alternative pedagogy, cultivating an awareness of their own positionality to the music curriculum, and embracing popular music practices can help to create a clear path forward for secondary music education that better meets the needs and interests of students.

Band in Secondary Education

Few teachers and administrators outside music education are aware that in most Canadian provinces, band is not mandated as part of the provincial curriculum but is instead pushed due to its long-standing cultural expectation and tradition. Band pedagogy in Canadian schools has been the common practice since the 19th century (Tan, 2016). Band is typically considered a large ensemble practice that belong to a subcategory of music education known as instrumental music. Instrumental music education typically begins in middle school and consists of the “teaching and learning of music through symphony orchestras and wind orchestras” (Tan, 2016, p. 92). Band is primarily teacher-driven and consists of students gathering to learn how to play a specific collection of westernized wind and percussion instruments. The goal of band is typically to perform wind ensemble repertoire that meets measurable music performance standards during a concert or festival (Heuser, 2011). In secondary schools, this has been the traditional approach to band with little change from administration and teachers.

Band Pedagogy

Band in secondary music education has led to the development of band-specific pedagogy, which has become the dominant pedagogical approach for most North American educators.
“Band pedagogy” and “instrumental music pedagogy” can be used interchangeably and have the same focus and goals. Band pedagogy focuses on the most effective ways to teach large groups of students in a large ensemble format (McNeill & McPhail, 2020). The goal of band pedagogy is to help students become proficient on their instrument in the shortest time possible (Regelski, 2020). This is primarily done through a teacher-centered approach whereby the teacher leads students through a series of drills or exercises during a band rehearsal (Allsup & Benedict, 2008). A unique aspect of band pedagogy is that it has a heavy focus on skill repetition to help students meet specific performance objectives; therefore, learning is more about the product created than the learning process in band (Allsup & Benedict, 2008). Band pedagogy is the dominant pedagogy for most North American secondary music educators.

Problematic Curricular and Pedagogical Approaches

The push to implement band pedagogy as curriculum has contributed to inflexible learning environments that do not meet the needs and interests of each student. Due to the common practices of band in schools, band pedagogy has become the dominant lens for interpreting music curricula, causing secondary music education to struggle to find a clear purpose for students. Many North American music educators' lack of curricular intent reveals a curricular "blind spot" that is created by combining band pedagogy and personal beliefs surrounding music (McPhail & McNeill, 2019, p. 365). That is, despite the physical existence of a secondary music education curriculum, many music educators remain hesitant or unable to express their understandings of music curricula in their classrooms. Unfortunately, this blind spot has contributed to conflicting curricula being implemented in many classrooms, because educators avoid defining their curricular understanding, and instead embrace cultural band practices as curricular outcomes and values (Saetre, 2018). This has resulted in educators' struggling to find a clear curricular purpose for students in secondary music education.

A large component of band pedagogy practised in secondary music classrooms that has been problematic is teachers' having to fulfill the role of conductor. Traditionally, the role of the conductor is not one that fosters individual and collective learning but is instead the director or primary influencer of all musical decision-making during rehearsals, which leaves little room for student autonomy (Heuser, 2011). When teachers are placed in the role of conductors, they stand on a podium to signify a physical and intellectual position of authority, superiority, and power over their students. Therefore, as the teachers conduct an ensemble by moving their baton, the intent is one of commanding or disciplining student musicians into creating quality music (Tan, 2016). The challenge of having teachers fulfilling the conductor role is that it fosters a teacher-centered learning environment wherein the beliefs and performance objectives of the conductor are imposed or projected onto students, therefore creating little room for student exploration and autonomy in a band setting.

Band pedagogy's focus on the achieving performance objective has continued to perpetuate an inflexible teacher-centered learning environment that has contributed to many teachers' dissatisfaction. In disciplines beyond secondary music education, pedagogical shifts toward student-centred learning approaches have been embraced to provide more flexibility, choice, and autonomy for students (Brown, 2003). However, most band pedagogy remains incompatible with pedagogy found in other disciplines. The heavy focus placed on achieving performance objectives has caused on average 68% of North American secondary music educators to be dissatisfied with the learning environments they must create (McPhail & McNeill, 2019, p. 439). This is largely due to educators' not being given the flexibility to "tactfully respond" (Van Manen, 2015, p. 82) to students and explore their musical interests when band pedagogy is implemented. Implementing band pedagogy that remains focused on achieving performance objectives has continued to perpetuate inflexible teacher-centered learning environments that have left many teachers dissatisfied. The ongoing push to implement band pedagogy...
Informal Learning: The Needed Pedagogical Approach

There are several solutions to these problems, including educators’ becoming more open to alternative pedagogy, cultivating an awareness of how curriculum is being implemented in music classrooms, and carrying out informal popular music practices to provide more flexibility for students and teachers. Educators who are willing to keep an open mind to alternative pedagogy outside traditional band pedagogy provide the possibilities for students’ needs to be better met and for more flexibility to emerge as the focus shifts from a teacher-centered learning environment to a student-centered learning environment. For this shift to occur, educators must consider creating a learning journey for students that is a true representation of how the discipline of music relates to students’ lives. To make music more relatable and meaningful for students, teachers must be willing to embrace journeying in music education as a “genuinely free space” (Smith, 1999, pp. 3-4) that can move away from the cultural expectation and long-standing traditions of band. It is only when educators become more open to alternative pedagogy in secondary music education that more flexibility can emerge and the interests and needs of individual students can be embraced.

Many music educators struggle with communicating how curriculum is being implemented in their classrooms; therefore, one of the solutions is for teachers to reconsider their own positionality to music curriculum so that they can better meet the needs and interest of their students. To help teachers reconsider their own positionality to curriculum, there are two curriculum worlds: “curriculum-as-planned” and the “curriculum-as-lived,” which educators must understand and cultivate an awareness of moving forward (Aoki, 2012, pp. 159-161). The curriculum-as-planned world can be depicted as a place focused on specific objectives for the year or the outcomes prescribed by a physical curriculum document. This world is where most secondary music educators live when they focus on equipping students with instrumental skills in order to meet rigid yearly performance or concert objectives (Heuser, 2011). The curriculum-as-lived world is characterized by students’ hopes, dreams, curiosities, and relationships to the subject being studied (Aoki, 2012, pp. 160-161) and is often the curriculum world that is overlooked by music educators. If educators readjust their positionality to the music curriculum so that they can dwell in between these two curricular worlds, they will be better equipped to communicate a clear purpose for how the music curriculum is implemented in their classroom; therefore, students’ needs and interests will be better met in their classroom.

The reality is that many music educators have a wide musical skill set and knowledge base that can be easily transferred to different musical genres so that the alternative pedagogical approach of informal learning can be executed (Black, 2017). In Nordic countries and the United Kingdom, a shift to informal pedagogical practices in secondary music education has been implemented so that students’ needs can be better met and students’ interests can be represented in the content learned (Hallman et al., 2017). Informal music pedagogy differs from band pedagogy by requiring teachers to give up sole control of the content and transfer their musical skills and knowledge into different musical genres so that students can become co-creators of the content explored (Hallman et al., 2017). Giving up control provides opportunities for informal learning to exist in the classroom, because students set their own learning objectives, determine the music they would like to learn, and engage in individual, peer, and large-group learning (Green, 2016). Many educators have a wide enough skill set and knowledge base to execute the alternative pedagogy of informal learning so that the needs and interests of their students can be met.

Implementing informal music practices specific to popular music can provide flexibility for students by creating opportunities for them to pursue their own musical interests. The ways
students can experience music in their daily lives is typically broken down into three categories: listening, playing, and composing (Green, 2012), all of which are best embodied by how popular musicians learn. In the United Kingdom, informal popular music practices have been implemented in secondary music education by allowing students to pick their own groups, form bands, and learn songs of their choice (Hallman et al., 2017). In these learning contexts, teachers played the role of facilitators or co-learners by providing mini lessons or instruction to specific individuals or in large groups as needed (Green, 2016). The results of implementing informal popular music approaches were that it increased students’ development of musical skills and knowledge while increasing students’ desire to attend music class, find enjoyment in music, and feel a strong sense of self-belief to complete the tasks presented in music (Hallman et al., 2018). If informal music practices of popular musicians are implemented in secondary music education, they can provide the flexibility for students to pursue their own interests. Educators’ becoming open to alternative pedagogy, cultivating an awareness of how curriculum is being implemented in music classrooms, and executing popular music practices can provide the flexibility needed for students and teachers moving forward.

Conclusion

The dominant practices of band pedagogy in secondary music education leave much to be desired for teachers as they try to meet the needs and interests of their students. Current expectations and traditions of implementing band pedagogy are teacher-centered and have left many educators dissatisfied. Alternative pedagogical approaches can be implemented to create more student-centered learning environments. These approaches depend on educators’ changing their mindset and beginning to push back against the cultural expectations and long-standing traditions of band pedagogy. Informal music pedagogy provides flexibility for students and teacher by providing opportunities for large-group, peer, and individual learning as long as teachers are able to shift their musical skills and knowledge to new genres. Using popular music practices in the classroom can create a sense of enjoyment and self-belief for students, because they pursue their own interest during class. Once educators become open to alternative pedagogy, cultivate an awareness of their own positionality to the music curriculum, and embrace popular music practices, secondary music education can have a clear path forward that better meets the needs and interests of students.

References


**About the Author**

Katelyn Jardine currently teaches band in Lloydminster, Alberta. Prior to moving to Lloydminster, she taught humanities and band in High River, Alberta. Katie is in the Master of Education program at Brandon University, specializing in curriculum and pedagogy. When not teaching, she can be found performing as a jazz saxophonist.