

**THE INFLUENCE OF GRADE LEVEL OF ENTRY TO BEGINNING BAND IN A SPLIT-SCHOOL
CONFIGURATION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF MUSICAL KNOWLEDGE, PERFORMANCE SKILLS
AND COLLABORATION**

PROPOSAL

By

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Submitted for Approval To:

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The influence of grade level of entry to beginning band in a split-school configuration on the development of musical knowledge, performance skills and collaboration

Abstract

Research addressing the appropriate age or grade level for entry to beginning band has been heavily focused on retention of music students. The few studies that have focused on the transmission of musical knowledge, performance skill and collaborative ability have focused heavily on Grades 5 and 6 as entry points as a result of shifts to a “middle school” philosophy of grade-level organization. For school districts who continue to use a traditional elementary vs. junior/senior high grade-level organization, no research has provided direction regarding whether or not ensemble instruction should begin in the elementary grades or following a move to a new school. This quantitative experimental-design study seeks to identify the most appropriate grade level of entry to beginning band. Student development in musical knowledge, performance skill and collaborative ability will be compared between students who entered beginning band in Grade 6 prior to a move to a new school for Grade 7 ($n \cong 55$) and students who will enter beginning band following their move to the new school in Grade 7 ($n \cong 50$). This study will provide evidence that will inform administrators when and how to schedule the initial introduction to ensemble music for students in their school division.

Introduction

Research in beginning band instruction is lacking in the identification of an appropriate grade to begin band instruction. If not for research on instructional strategies and materials, the largest body of research in beginning bands has been on retention and predictive measures, neither of which are topics of pedagogical import (Cavitt, 2006). The vast majority of all research in beginning band has studied students in Grades 6 or lower. Only three doctoral dissertations focused on grade level of entry before 1980, and only one since then has been completed (Cavitt, 2006; Hartley, 1996a). The first study’s conclusion that band instruction should begin in elementary school was based on a comparison between Grade 4 and Grade 7 students, not Grade 6 and Grade 7 students (Strachan, 1964). The second study focused on the optimal grade between Grades 5 and 6, and while directive, again did not consider later grades nor the configuration of grades in different buildings (Silliman, 1977). The 1990s saw a brief influx of articles published on the subject, however that researched focused on elementary grade levels as entry points for beginning band. No research has been completed determining whether or not beginning band should in fact begin in elementary grades, or if it should in fact not be introduced until Junior High.

Of the research that discusses grade level of entry for beginning band, the most prescriptive work has been completed by Dr. Linda Hartley of the University of Dayton, Ohio. Hartley’s work on the relationships between starting grade, school organization, and student participation and student attitude in music has provided the best evidence of when students should begin band instruction. Hartley’s work stemmed from an increase in the number of schools moving to a “middle school” philosophy, where students would complete up to the end of Grade 4 or 5 in an elementary building and move to a new building to begin either Grade 5 or 6. While directive for schools who have adopted this organization of grade levels, her work only provides hypotheses for what may be successful in schools whose grade configuration is more traditional, with elementary continuing to Grade 6, and students entering a new building for Grade 7. (Hartley, 1991; 1996a; 1996b)

There are many suggestions as to when beginning band should in fact begin. The National Coalition for Core Arts Standards produced what is now known as the National Core Arts Standards which is designed under the

assumption that ensemble instruction begins in Grade 5 (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014). The National Association for Music Education directs administrators toward a Grade 5 entry point to beginning band instruction as a minimum expectation (National Association for Music Education, 2015). It is also a holdover policy from the time the organization was known as the Music Educators National Conference, and was supported at the time by the American School Band Directors Association despite having no specific research or rationale to support such a claim (National Association for Music Education, 2015; Delzell & Doerksen, 1998). Although this seems to show a consensus despite a lack of evidence, the actual implementation is far more varied with schools offering the first ensemble-type instruction in a range from Grade 3 through Grade 9 (Stuart, 2012; Gordon, 2012). In many schools in Canada the trend is to not hire specialty music education instructors at the elementary level, and that in turn creates a trend to delay the grade level of entry to instrumental music education (Wasiak, 2013).

The lack of consensus on the subject is likely due to a myopic view by music education researchers of when beginning band should begin based on the goal of student retention. This study seeks to avoid the concept of retention as a worthy goal and focus on the student first. As a result, the study will identify if indeed ensemble-type music instruction in a band format should begin before Grade 7, or if Grade 7 is an appropriate level to begin such instruction when considering grade level organization in school buildings.

Background of the Study

The impetus for beginning the study came with the cancellation of a band program at the Grade 6 level at Holy Spirit Academy of the Christ the Redeemer Catholic School Division in the 2017-2018 School Year. Holy Spirit Academy has traditionally offered a beginning band program at the Grade 6 level, feeding into a Grade 7-12 band program at Notre Dame Collegiate, both located in High River, Alberta, Canada. The rationale for the program cancellation included an inability to find a qualified educator, and a report submitted to the Superintendent of the school division two years earlier (Schile, 2015).

The Schile report provided two recommendations specific to beginning band. The first was to “consider the reason grade six instrumental programs are being instituted and consider the logistics around the program including time, budget and facility. Music is mandatory in grade six, but optional at junior and senior high.” (Schile, 2015, p. 23) The second was to “ensure schools that have a dedicated instrumental program in grade six, have a proper facility in place for sound and storage of instruments and equipment.” (Schile, 2015, pp. 23-24) Both of these recommendations stemmed from the fact that across the entire school division, only one Grade 6 Concert Band program was consistently meeting curricular requirements as prescribed by Alberta Education (Schile, 2015). Other contributing issues included the absence of specialist music educators and professional development for generalist music educators (Schile, 2015). Holy Spirit Academy does not have a dedicated space for music, and the logistics around time in particular are challenging for that school. These issues are not unique to Holy Spirit Academy, or even the Christ the Redeemer School Division, but in fact pervade the entire province of Alberta, and much of Canada (Government of Alberta, 2009; Wasiak, 2013).

Any attempts to address these concerns still do not address primary recommendation of considering “the reason grade six instrumental programs are being instituted” (Schile, 2015, p. 23). Therefore, upon learning of the cancellation of the program, I sought to find evidence that supported the decision to cancel, and although no such evidence was found, neither was evidence found that negated the decision to cancel. The need for the study was identified once finding this gap in the research.

The necessity for beginning this research immediately is also high. In 2009 a draft framework for refreshed curriculum for visual art, drama, music and dance was completed with a very poor response from arts educators including music educators (Government of Alberta, 2009; McGinnis, 2010). Alberta Education is currently undergoing a significant curriculum review that will result in largely new curricula for music education in the province (Liepins, 2016). With the poor response regarding the 2009 draft framework, and the potential for a repeat, music educators are nervous and hopeful at the same time regarding how the curriculum review will proceed (Bennett, 2010). The need for music education to be offered to all students is not in dispute, and in fact is supported by research conducted by the

Alberta Government (Government of Alberta, 2009). The need for much of that instruction to be in an ensemble format is also supported by research and public opinion (Strachan, 1964; Delzell & Doerksen, 1998; McGinnis, 2010; Wall, 2013; Wasiak, 2013; National Association for Music Education, 2015; Schile, 2015). Although curriculum review is likely to be informed by research, if no research exists to provide evidence of when beginning band should be first implemented, then it runs the risk of being inadequate.

Method

The purpose of this study is to identify the effect grade-level of entry to beginning band has on students in a split school configuration on their musical knowledge, performance skill and collaboration. To this effect, this study will address the following questions;

1. Does entering beginning band in Grade 6 before moving to a new school in Grade 7 impact the transmission of musical knowledge more positively than if the students enter beginning band in Grade 7 after changing schools?
2. Does entering beginning band in Grade 6 before moving to a new school in Grade 7 impact the development of performance skill more positively than if the students enter beginning band in Grade 7 after changing schools?
3. Does entering beginning band in Grade 6 before moving to a new school in Grade 7 impact the students' readiness for collaboration more positively than if the students enter beginning band in Grade 7 after changing schools?

Two different student groups will be studied; students in Grade 7 at Notre Dame Collegiate during the 2017/2018 School Year who have already entered concert band instruction during their time in Grade 6 at Holy Spirit Academy, and students in Grade 7 at Notre Dame Collegiate during the 2018/2019 School Year who will have had no previous entry into concert band instruction. Students will be organized into groups according to their non-musical achievement using data collected from their school reports at the end of their respective Grade 7 years for comparative analysis between student achievement groups and from year to year. The study will be a quantitative pre-test and post-test experimental design, with the pre-tests occurring in the first month of the students' respective school years and the post-tests occurring in the last month of that school year. Although the students in the 2018/2019 School Year will not have had ensemble instruction, they will have had elementary music instruction, and therefore a pre-test will still be a useful tool in measuring their relevant skills.

The dependent variable of musical knowledge will be measured using a researcher-designed test in two parts, written and aural. The content of this test will be based on the current Alberta Program of Studies for Instrumental Music at the Grade 7 level, *Breezin' Thru Theory and Composing*, the *Master Theory Workbooks* and *Sound Innovations* as resources (Alberta Education, 1988; Breezin' Thru Inc., 2017; Peters & Yoder, 1963; Sheldon, Boonshaft, Black, & Phillips, 2010). The dependent variable of performance skill will be measured using the *Watkins-Farnum Performance Scale*, a successful tool that has been identified as reliable in previous studies (Watkins & Farnum, 1954; Strachan, 1964; Mitchum, 1969; Silliman, 1977; Moorer, 1977; Gleason, 1998). The dependent variable of collaborative skill will be measured using a researcher-modified version of the "Student Attitudes Toward Group Environments" questionnaire, a Likert scale survey used in other studies on students in collaborative learning environments, which I will modify to make it relevant to a musical instruction environment (Centre for the Study of Learning & Performance; Bronet, 2008).

The instructional period will include transmission of musical learning through the concert band method *Sound Innovations*, as it has been proven to be one of few methods that systematically meet the requirements of the National Core Music Standards (Watkins K. , 2011). This method will be supplemented by instruction using the *Breezin' Thru Theory and Composing* tool which has shown to be a highly engaging method of theory and composition instruction (Wasylak, 2017). The primary teaching method will be a comprehensive musicianship approach from the podium, with standalone units for Christmas, Festival Performance and Marching Band. Every effort will be made to adhere to similar timelines for introduction of concepts in both groups of students, and researcher notes will reflect this effort.

For the purposes of this study, I will engage in practitioner action research, a subset of action research. This is a scenario where the teacher is the same individual performing the research, and therefore is also part of the study because they

are seldom studying a problem in their classroom or school divorced from their own personal and professional beliefs and actions. (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p. 32)

It is important for a researcher in such a context be ready to challenge commonly held beliefs and rules that usually go unchallenged. My previous research conducted through the acquisition of my graduate degree *summa cum laude* from Boston University, my publications and presentations provide evidence that I am such a practitioner (Windsor, 2014). I will be the students' regular teacher, and therefore will be participating in the class activities. The previously commonly held belief that I have held to is that student ensemble instruction should begin in later elementary grades, simply because that has been the common practice and advocacy has matched this, as mentioned previously in this document. This study will require me to be open to a new truth, should the study lead to such a conclusion.

Approval Process

This study will not be conducted without the approval of all those directly involved. In order, approval must be acquired from;

1. Paul Dunphy, Principal, Notre Dame Collegiate;
2. Dr. Scott Morrison, Superintendent of Schools, Christ the Redeemer Catholic School Division (or his designate);
3. Parents or Guardians of the students that would participate in the study; and
4. The students that would participate in the study.

Reports will be provided semi-annually on the progress of the study following the compilation of pre-test and post-test data. This study will be conducted under the direct supervision of Paul Dunphy, Principal at Notre Dame Collegiate. Advice and recommendations will also be sought from Dr. Edwin Wasiak who currently leads the music education department at the University of Lethbridge, and Dr. Karin Hendricks of Boston University who is engaging in research around music student engagement. The study will likely also be discussed with Dr. Andrew Goodrich of Boston University who has been a regular doctoral committee member for many projects through that school.

Although they have no direct impact on the study itself, there are other stakeholders who have an interest in the results and activities of this study. These include Holy Spirit Academy's Principal Patricia MacDonald, the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Alberta Registered Music Teachers' Association, the Alberta Band Association, and any organization who agrees to provide funding for this research. Mrs. MacDonald of Holy Spirit Academy will have an interest particularly in the results of this study, as will any other elementary school administrator in a school that extends to Grade 6, as it will likely inform their decision on whether or not to introduce concert band at their school, and when. The Alberta Teachers' Association and Alberta Registered Music Teachers' Associations both have an interest in that I am also a professional member of their organization, and must prioritize my professional obligations above the study. The Alberta Band Association has an interest as they provide many of the resources, programs, and standards for band instruction in the province, and the results will likely inform some of their policies.

Closing

It is my intention to provide the best music education program possible in my school setting. I have been presented with a challenge, and I intend to ensure my response is informed through research and sound pedagogical practice. As none exists, I feel the need and capacity to engage in this research. I intend to meet my professional responsibilities with a high level of rigor and discipline for the betterment of my students, and believe it is necessary for me to complete this study with the same level of expectation in order to do so properly.

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Practitioner-Action Research to be conducted by Joel Windsor. Approved by the following.

Paul Dunphy, Principal, Notre Dame Collegiate

Date

Dr. Scott Morrison, Superintendent of Schools,
Christ the Redeemer Catholic School Division (or designate)

Date