

Factors Influencing Elementary School Band Membership

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ABSTRACT: In this qualitative research, underpinned by the symbolic interactionism theory, we explored factors that influence elementary school band membership, using the Snowden school as a case study. We conducted individual interviews for the band director, three band members, and three parents, using semi-structured interview guides. Thematic analysis of data revealed that the band ran a three-prong program with multiple-genre repertory. Findings also indicated that membership of the band was influenced by interest, enjoyment, personal values, social satisfaction, and parental influence. The band had funding challenges. Hence, we recommended more concerted efforts of stakeholders to maximize the prospects of the band. We also suggested a future replication of this study for a longer period, using observation as an additional method to collect more triangulated and saturated data.

Keywords: band, membership, influence, interest, students, director, parents

I. INTRODUCTION

The Will Earhart's orchestra in Richmond, Indiana is credited as the harbinger of instrumental music in the American school curriculum. It started in 1898 and created a pathway for others to follow. The school band tradition owes to popular touring groups of Patrick Gilmore and John Phillip Sousa (Brown, 2016; Cipolla, 1978). The last half of the nineteenth century is considered the Golden Age of bands (Brown, 2016). Progressive leaders used music to socialize students to become productive citizens of an evolving complex industrial society. Concurrently, school systems began to provide instruments, rehearsal rooms, uniforms and even hired full-time music teachers towards attaining the goal. Moreover, the booming economy during the 1920s was beneficial as more musical instruments became available for the bands.

Technological advancement was advantageous to the bands. However, it had an adverse impact on the bands. With the invention of recording equipment and media transmission, live band performances were rarely demanded (Gilmore, 2003). Moreover, there was a change in music taste as more people gravitated towards new and popular genres of music Webster, 2019)

The National Association of Music Merchants (Stewart, 2005) indicated a decline in student participation in secondary school music programs, with several factors contributing to the decline. For instance, Warnock (2009) concluded that participation in middle school ensembles could be for personal, musical, or social reasons Also, this problem could be attributed to a crisis of relevance; where students do not find any connection between the values of music instruction and their lifelong goals (Dale 2018; Cavitt 2005).

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors that determined students' membership in the Snowden Elementary School band in Memphis, Tennessee. The study investigation was guided by three research questions as follows: (1) What is the scope of repertoire and instrumentation for the band? (2) To what extent is the band patronized in terms of membership? (3) What are the factors influencing membership of the band?

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

We have reviewed literature, highlighting common thematic areas which were featured in the literature. That is to indicate that while we construct subheading in this section, we have also paraphrased some sub-headings from extant works.

The Band Concept

A typical band program comprises marching band, one or more concert ensembles and various woodwind ensembles, brass ensemble, percussion ensemble and the likes (Gaines, 1998). School bands can rehearse during class time if it is embedded in the school curriculum or after school hours as an extracurricular activity (Vest et al., 2022). Previous research (Rogers, 1985) suggests that parents, students, and administrators expect marching band directors to have their ensembles participate in competition with bands from other schools. Marching bands are criticized for their perceived lack of musical qualities since they are geared towards extra-musical benefits. However, Temple (1973) argues that there is no significant difference between competitive and noncompetitive band programs regarding their musical achievement levels. Relatedly, Garrison (1986) postulated that a primary reason for participating in competitive marching band is the high-performance level achieved by the ensemble. However, other scholars have identified multiple factors informing students' band membership decisions as expounded in the ensuing paragraphs.

Student Motivation

Although some individuals may join a band for the enjoyment of the musical aesthetic elements - timbre, texture, harmony as well as major and minor modulations among others-music is not the core or only reason ensembles exist because students participate in band programs for several reasons (Hash, 2022). This understanding bears a serious implication for music educators. Dale (2018) corroborate Cavitt (2005) on the dire consequences of failure to tailor band music instruction towards the diverse reasons for band membership, stressing that this will lead to the crisis of relevance.

Stewart (2005) revealed that most students indicated interest to continue in the band to maintain friendship, have fun and take trips. Also, Adderly et al. (2003) observed that band membership is a desire for students to form a group to which they belong with the view to boosting their confidence, sense of belonging and self-esteem. Similarly, Morrison (2001) in Gibson (2016) opined that students involved in music made their own social networks and created a culture that sought to enrich the lives of its members while according to Hayes (2005), students' participation and sustained membership in the band is connected to their comfortability with the band director. More so, Klinedinst (1991) provided correlation between academic performance and student retention in the band, a basis of Sandene's (1994) argument that student's band membership is an effective way to get parental, administrative and community support is to advertise the students' accomplishments. In the same vein, students who do not experience success in their instruments or skill building may give up and move on to any activity where they can achieve success.

Peer pressure

Peer pressure is a threat to band enrollment, where a student decides to either join or avoid the band mainly as a result of peer influence rather than passion and personal conviction. Justus (2001) postulates that student recognition depended on the status the peer group assigned to the band program to which they belong. Also, Boyle et al. (1995) identifies students' loss of interest as the largest factor influencing their decision to remain or quit the band. Other contributing factors include interest in other areas such as sports. One reason for which students were no longer interested in band was that they considered it to be a short-term hobby which is done for a few years. Sloboda (2001) confirmed that students view music ensembles as less important than academic subjects and not relating to any real word application.

Scheduling

A study by Rohnert (2002) revealed a drop in the enrollment of band classes by 31% due to a 4x4-block schedule¹. Conflict between band classes and other classes can pose a huge challenge to band membership. Baker (2009) noted that some students could not participate in band due to lack of effort on the counselor's part to fit it into the students' schedule. Students are even advised to drop band classes.

Non-musical Factors

Student music participation is not only attributed to musical factors but also to non-musical factors which are mostly overlooked. Some of the salient non-musical factors influencing band participation include social economic status, academic achievement, ethnicity, and parent involvement. It is likely that students from low-income families will be few in band membership. Also, the correlation between student academic achievement band participation has been well documented (Kinney, 2010; Albert, 2006; McCarthy 1980; Wolfe, 1969; Kinney & Forsythe, 2005; Chapleau & Iwenaga, 1999).

¹ Students take four courses each semester for about 90 minutes a day; teachers teach three courses per semester. Some blocks are split into two 45-minute periods for lunch or short electives.

Non-musical factors pose a greater challenge in recruiting and retaining students in instrumental music ensembles. The typical enrollment in most urban schools include a greater proportion of minority students, single-parented students, and students who cannot afford instrumental music instruction due to their low socioeconomic status (Albert, 2006; Carver et al. 2022; Forsythe, 1990; Chenault, 1994). Apart from musical factors such as aptitude, achievement, and music background, non-music factors should also be examined since they may affect students' enrollment and even persistence in instrumental music programs. With this knowledge, music educators can better develop strategies to ensure that students with diverse characteristics and backgrounds can have equal access to music. Otherwise, (Kinney, 2019) fears that, instrumental music may not be a viable elective option

Theoretical Framework

I situated the study within the framework of the symbolic interactionism theory and the social network paradigm. According to LeCompte et al. (2010), symbolic interactionism is a social theoretical framework which is credited to George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). The theory assumes that people respond to elements of their environments according to the subjective meanings they attach to those elements, such as meanings being created and modified through social interaction involving symbolic communication with other people (Blumer, 1969). The social network paradigm is a theoretical construct that studies relationships between individuals, groups, organizations and societies. In this light, people are influenced by their fellows as well as the environments in which they find themselves. Drawing on these theoretical perspectives, we investigated various ways in which the musico-social environment created by the school bands influenced the extent of membership of the band, considering the school and the home as co-agents of socialization (Smedley, 1992).

III. METHOD

We employed the case study design for this investigation, which was situated in the qualitative paradigm. We conveniently selected Snowden School in Memphis, Tennessee for the study, triggered by an initial conversation with a student of the school who lived in the neighborhood of the lead researcher. Although the study was situated in a school environment, we assumed the school to be a microcosm in a macrocosm. Also, our initial conversation with one of the participants (a student) suggested that some parents were associated with the decisions of their wards to be members of the selected school band. For that matter we included three parents in the sample. These were the first three parents who opted voluntarily to participate in the study following our invitation through the band members. We conducted the study on the Snowden School in Memphis marching band which doubled as the concert band since both bands were made up of the same students (seventh and eighth graders). We identified domains of the study to include students, staff (band director), parents, school authority, community and the government. For the sake of feasibility, the study was focused mainly on three domains; students, band director and parents.

Using convenience and snowball techniques, we sampled fourteen participants, comprising the band director, seven students in addition to six parents. In order to gain access to the school, the lead researcher wrote a letter to the band director, seeking permission to conduct the research. We also sought the informed consent of both students and parents to participate in the study voluntarily. The parents were then contacted by means of invitation (consent forms) which we then gave through the band members (students).

We interviewed each of the participants individually using three separate semi-structured interview guides; one for the band director, one for the students, and another one for the parents. The semi-structured choice of interview was to ensure that vital data were not omitted while making room for in-depth and saturated data collection. The segment for parents' interview included nine open ended questions to gain an understanding of how parents influenced band membership of their wards. Interview questions were informed by the research objectives and the purpose of the study.

The interview questions for the band director elicited holistic information, as much as possible, about the band, students and parents. We recorded the interviews on a mobile device and subsequently analyzed them. Follow-up interviews and correspondences were carried out in the research process until data saturation was attained. Interview data collected by the two researchers were pooled together and then transcribed independently by each researcher to guard against biases (Worthy & Thompson, 2009). For the purpose of member-checking, the transcribed data were exchanged between the two researchers and reviewed, after which the transcription was returned to the interviewees for further verification. The thematic data analysis was completed using the six main phases as generally recommended by qualitative researchers thus familiarization with the data, generation of codes, generation of initial themes, reviewing initial themes, defining and naming

themes, and writing the research report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Creswell, & Tashakkori, 2007; Ozuem et al., 2022).

IV. FINDINGS

We analyzed responses to the interview questions as given by the participants and reported their views using a researcher-interpretation approach, under major themes which emanated from the data analysis. An interview with the band director of Snowden Elementary School revealed some information on the history, instrumentation, repertoire and overall function of the band which we have reported as follows:

Brief History of the Band

Snowden School is a public school under the auspices of the Shelby County and credited as one of the oldest schools in Memphis, dating back to the late 1800s. The school's hundredth anniversary was celebrated not long ago. This school comprises the pre-kindergarten through the eighth grade. The Snowden School is acclaimed the "Home of the Mighty Sound of Midtown." This name was earned by the superiority of its music programs including the orchestra, choir and bands. In 2018, Mr. Cameron Ross became the band director of Snowden School. His band career started twenty years ago. Based on our observation and impression, we described his work with the bank as being really impactful.

Music/Band Program

A music program is run from the sixth through eighth grade of the Snowden School. The study revealed that most members of the middle school band come from the elementary section of the school. Their band program includes the Beginners' band, Marching band, Concert band and Jazz band. According to the band director, Snowden School is the only middle school in the city which has a jazz band.

Activity of the Bands

Members of the Beginning band did not get involved in a lot of performances unlike the other bands which are outgoing. The Marching and Concert bands are involved in the Fall and Spring Concerts. They were constantly involved in regional concert festivals and a lot of home-coming parades as well as holiday parades including the famous Memphis city Christmas Parade and the likes. The jazz band was more selective as intended members are auditioned. The instrumentation of this band include saxophone, trumpet, trombone, piano, drums, guitar etc. They perform at different school functions like the school board meeting. In addition, Snowden School has the Drum Line which was mainly for percussive instruments.

Repertoire Selection

The music performed by the marching band was based on events in which the group features. The band director also considers the interest of the students as well as the diverse audience tastes. Creatively, he writes and arranges different music in order to adapt them to the group. The repertoire of this band also reflects patriotic fervor and serves as a medium to preserve and propagate music history. Hence, the band repertoire features a variety of musical genres including pep tunes for sporting events, popular songs, reggae and blues, raps, soul music, songs from the Stack Records; an American record label founded in 1967 and originally based in Memphis, Tennessee.

The staple for the concert band was classical music. However, to avoid monotonous repertoire, the band director includes theme music or soundtracks from different movies. His flexibility allows band members to play pieces of music that appeal to them. Our findings resonate with previous studies which show that a greater percentage of students join the band because of their love for music (Mantie, 2012; Kinney 2019).

Instrument Selection

Students were allowed to choose their instruments. However, it behooves the band director to guide them, based on their interests, abilities, and in some rare situations, availability of instruments. Primarily, each band member owns their personal instruments, and has ready access to their instruments. For those band members there is almost no problem about which instrument to play in which event. But if at a point in time a member did not have a personal instrument, that member will rely on an instrument that belongs to the school, provided the instrument which the member plays was available.

Band Curriculum and Schedules

The curriculum of the band was in tandem with the Tennessee standard for arts. However, it was tailored to suit the band and the resources available to them. Just like other elective classes, band performances counted towards the overall grades of the students. Band members receive lessons on rhythm, notation, singing,

pitch identification, dynamics, instrument maintenance, playing techniques like embouchure, tonguing, gripping, breathing, posture to mention but a few. The lessons each band member received were based on its applicability to their respective instruments. A flute player, for instance, got to learn about the treble clef and other concepts that related to the flute.

Regarding the schedules of the band, the jazz band met on Wednesday while the Concert/Marching band met on Tuesdays. Furthermore, Thursdays were the meeting days for the percussion ensemble. Each rehearsal session spanned an hour and half (3:30 – 5:00 p.m.). A participant (student) pointed out that the band schedule can change when an event is cancelled for instance.

Membership and Staffing

Members of the Snowden School bands were mainly sixth to eighth graders. Currently, there were eighty (80) students in the Beginning Band, Sixty (60) in the Concert/Marching Band and twelve (12) in the Jazz Band. Most members of the band were African Americans. In fact, the entire school was characterized by African American majority. The band director explained that “majority of the white kids moved to charity schools in 2000” (personal communication, October 25, 2023). The researchers also observed that females were privileged in the gender composition of the group, although the band director could not account for the supposed mismatch. Research shows that gender is also a factor influencing band membership. However, it can be blurred due to an overlap with other factors (Fortney et al., 1993; Manolios et al., 2019). Likewise, McCarthy (1980) showed that gender was a significant factor in predicting persistence in urban instrumental music, although only less than 1% of student dropout variance can be traced to this factor.

In terms of staffing, Ross was the only one that was responsible for the various bands. However, he delegated responsibilities and created room for students to take up some leadership roles such as conducting, section leading and the likes. Responses of participants suggested that Alumni support had been a great reason for the success of the band. Some former band members also helped during band classes.

Interest, Love and Enjoyment

The band director pointed out the vitality of individuals’ interest, love and a sense of enjoyment in ensuring remarkable band membership. He stressed his conviction by indicating that “Band participation and performance is predicated on how interesting I make it for the students. Therefore, I always make a deliberate effort to make the group meetings enjoyable. A lot of times, the kids have a talent in music but they don’t know it yet; so, I try to tap it out. Positive attitude is capable of making people come to the band. Despite the negative aspects, I still enjoy working with them” (personal communication, October 25, 2023). Students also confirmed that they enjoyed being in the band, and also appreciate the songs that are performed there. One student participant expressed his excitement thus: “... Furioso is a song that is upbeat and enjoyable to me” (personal communication, November 3, 2023). Other participants confirmed the enjoyable nature of their rehearsal meetings, suggesting that some students joined the band because of the music.

Furthermore, students shared that mastering their band instruments and music was not challenging but “fun”. One of the seventh-grade band members explained the preference of band over choir saying “choir seems like too much work” (personal communication, November 3, 2023). Responses from other students revealed that the band offered a relaxed atmosphere for learning and performing music. Band members were patient and tolerant with one another and created room for individual and group improvements.

Personal Values

A student shared her view indicating that participation in the band had helped to develop her musical knowledge and skills and helped her to be “better focused” on her studies. She added that “... and the improvement reflects in other subjects too” (personal communication, October 14, 2023). Two of the students intended to continue with the band in high school and later, in college. The band director was driven by a deep sense of fulfilment. “As a saxophonist, I sometimes hire my former students to back me up during my gigs” (Ibid.). He also remarked that “going to college through band scholarship is an attractive reward” as he recalled that two former band students graduated last summer from a funded master’s program.

Social Satisfactions

Students agreed that the band fostered friendship and communication among them. The band has “a big friends’ group where we [band members] can interact outside classes and help one another.” Students disclosed that joining the band was a means to “be with friends” (personal communication, November 17, 2023). Band performances also created an opportunity for students to interact with their peers from other schools. The band

master believed that outdoor performances and competitions helped to sustain the interest of band members and made them work harder. Parents responses also showed that the band was helpful for their children's social life, self-expression and overall development.

Parental Influence

Findings of the study indicated that a good number of parents supported their children in the band and also attend their performances. "Watching my child perform in the band is a thing of joy" (personal communication, November 14, 2023). The results suggested, generally, that parents affirm their support by taking their children to and from rehearsals and also attending band performances. One of the parents, however, regretted that her time schedule did not allow her to attend band performances of her ward.

Resources and Support

The band director informed us that members of the school community were very supportive of the band. Snowden School has a large alumni association as most members of the community attended the school. They usually donate band uniforms. They also host competitions sometimes. Like the band director, some parents applauded Shelby County in Memphis for supplying musical instruments for all schools in the district, including Snowden School.

Finally, the school partners with a lot of non-profit organizations in the city, some of which cater for the provision of instrument accessories like reeds and mouthpieces, to mention but a few. The result further reveals that certain institutions usually sponsor students who wish to continue in band program till high school and college. They donate instruments for students to use as long as they stay in the band.

Challenges

Converse to strengths revealed in this study about the Snow band program, the band also faces some challenges, the major one being understaffing due to lack of funds. The band director, Ross, indicated that the teachers were generally underpaid and less appreciated. He, therefore, described his career in band directing as a "labor of love." He ended on the note that the COVID 19 pandemic took a toll on the bands and resulted to a decline in band membership. Ross describes the current period as a "rebuilding time for bands" (personal communication, November 15, 2023).

Limitations

The sampling of the study may not be a good representation of the members of the band since only seven students were selected conveniently due to accessibility constraints. Also, the duration of the study was relatively too short to designate this study as seminal study, conducted in typical case study design. It is therefore, with a degree of reluctance for us to generalize the findings of the study even to the bounded case that was investigated.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Transition of students from the elementary school band to the middle school band indicates a sustained interest of students in band membership. Hence, to acquire music performance skills is not always the primary reason for which students join the bands. A time saving technique adopted by the band master is by teaching each band member what pertains to his/her instrument only. It follows that parental influence may not be a huge determinant for students' participation in the band.

We therefore recommend that the band director, band members, parents and all other stakeholders make collective efforts to maximize membership of the band. Secondly, band performances should be used for fundraising in order to finance the cost of recruiting and retaining more instructors. Besides, hiring student teachers is a possible solution. Moreover, the band should not become a holding ground for uninterested people. Apart from musical factors such as aptitude, achievement, and musical background, non-music factors should also be examined since they may affect students' enrollment and persistence in instrumental music programs. With this knowledge, music educators can better develop strategies to ensure that students with diverse characteristics and backgrounds can have equal access to music. Otherwise, instrumental music may not be a viable elective option.

Future research will involve a replication of this study for a longer time span, using observation as an additional method to collect more saturated and triangulated data.

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