



CURRICULUM IMBALANCE

A Case For The School Band Program

by Michael Scholfield

Greek philosophy maintained that each individual would encounter both practical and subject based education—liberal arts, arithmetic and medicine, gymnastics and wrestling along with moral education including music, poetry and philosophy. This was considered the making of a well-rounded Greek scholar. Music and dance were at the very top of the curriculum as essential skills to help brains cope with fundamentals of other subject areas.

In contrast, today's school timetable allocations usually give music a meagre percentage of time in a normal school week. Language Arts gets one forty minute period daily, compared to Band's one or two forty minute periods during a six day cycle. Some band rooms are shared facilities, requiring time to set up and tear down equipment which makes for even less teaching time. Our students are not being given time to reap the benefits of a well-rounded curriculum.

Timetabling Solutions

School concert bands consist of three main categories—woodwind, brass and percussion. These can be separated within a timetable to ensure students are getting the best instruction. Flute, oboe, clarinet, saxophone and bassoon can be grouped together for rehearsal, as can trumpet, trombone, French horn, euphonium and tuba. Percussion covers Timpani, snare drum, bass drum and numerous percussive accoutrements. Percussion can be grouped with woodwind or brass if needed.

One of the best options is to set up a rotation within a rotation, giving the best instruction to a student that a teacher can offer. Assuming there are eight periods in a school day, students would be given a forty minute period (by instrument type). Like instruments can be grouped together according to the instrumentation of the band. The full band would be given a period or a double, if possible, bringing all the work together. Groups would have been able to practise difficult sections in the music, which is essential for a polished performance.

Students would miss different subjects during the week, but not the same period each time. Band would occur twice within a six-day timetable. Students would be given an individual Band timetable to allow them to understand the rotation. With co-operation from the staff, this system can work with success. If the numbers are small in a school band, the rotation is flexible and can be adjusted to suit the situation. I have personally used this method of teaching in a junior high school setting and found that the standard of the band improved significantly. Students were motivated to practise and improve their playing.

Rotation and separation by instrument is essential in a String program. There are big differences between violin, viola, cello and double bass. Each of these require individual help before any success can be achieved. Successful string teaching, in particular, relies on repetition and encouragement. Both String and Band programs, in addition to their schedules, need more time for rehearsal during lunch hour or before and after school when possible.

Group and Individual Instruction

Band requires large group instruction using a choice of several common books written for the band to function as a whole group. These books have many

good attributes but have a few problems because of the differences of difficulty between instruments—what is easy for flute and clarinet is very difficult for oboe, for example. Unless students have some individual lessons on assembling, disassembling and position of fingers for notation, there can be little success. Progress is slow and becomes frustrating for pupils, teachers and parents.

Specialist Instructors

Teaching Band is a specialist area, and should be delivered by teachers who have had specific training, including exposure to various instrument types, spending three months on each instrument, learning the basic fingering and playing in a small group. Every school Band director is required to conduct a large or small ensemble. Regular practise with groups is essential, and should be part of teachers' training. This would equip them to later teach beginner pupils with competence.

Failing specific training, Band directors need first hand experience. For example, one of my colleagues had a major in voice and had some piano experience, joined a community band to gain some experience with the different instruments, and later was able to help beginners at his school.

Some teachers are asked to teach other subjects with Band to make a full time position. Some take an itinerant position in three or four schools. Unfortunately, these assignments are not optimal, because a successful program can only be achieved by putting in extra time for quality during lunch hours and/or before and after school.

Avoiding Conflict with Other Subject Areas

Conflict with other subjects is common in some schools. Students have to make a choice between Band/Art and Drama/French. With some careful planning this can be eliminated, giving students a better choice for the year.

In my experience, sporting activities are classed as more important than the Fine Arts. Grants and monies available are generally given to the Physical Education program and only anything left over is distributed within the Fine Arts program, even though the Fine Arts program operates throughout the school year, as compared to a football program which lasts three months! Long term planning could help bring better balance to the funding allocated to the various disciplines.

Keep Calm, Play On!

Despite the current situation in some Canadian schools, Band still survives. Enthusiastic directors do their best and look forward to change. The Greek civilization from the 1st century had the right balance of subjects, and had realized the importance of the left and right hemispheres of the brain. What makes a well-rounded Canadian? Perhaps the Ministers of Education should be asking this question.

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