Practice Methods and the Middle School Band Student

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**Abstract**

The purpose of the study was to explore self-regulated efficient practice in Middle School Instrumental students. Nineteen middle school students volunteered to participate in this study. This study was designed to as a three-week study to collect the quality and appropriate data. Data sources that were used were (a) an initial survey, (b) weekly survey, (c) practice group discussion and goal setting, (d) and a final survey. The initial survey revealed common strategies utilized by each participant and to determine goals for self-regulated practice. The group discussion engaged the participants in discussing their practice, and application of the strategies that were taught better increasing participants’ self-regulated practice.

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The body of your paper uses a half-inch first line indent and is double-spaced. APA style provides for up to five heading levels, shown in the paragraphs that follow. Note that the word Introduction should not be used as an initial heading, as it’s assumed that your paper begins with an introduction.

# Literature Review

Practice is an important part of learning any instrument and can aid all directors in teaching students at any level, especially students at the Middle School Level. Effective practicing strategies will establish confidence and build strong instrumental musicians. Research in this area may help develop techniques and strategies that will aid directors in achieving success in music programs, while building self-efficacy in practice sessions, especially at the Middle School level. This literature review examined several articles that provided research-based techniques for effective practice through teaching practice strategies to Middle School students.

Self-regulation is an important component to effective practice as a musician (Miksza, Blackwell, Roseth, 2018). Musicians who strive for musical excellence practice for many hours individually and meticulously. The musicians during this time, set specific and detailed goals, track progress, and evaluate the results of these practice sessions. Much research has been completed which demonstrates that many Middle School musicians are unable to effectively demonstrate effective practice and cannot determine effective practice techniques (Prichard, 2020). In perspective, the idea is that best practice strategies lead to strong self-regulatory practice and increases effectiveness, students need to be taught different strategies, how to apply, and how to determine which work best for them.

Middle school students have a desire to experience music in many ways both intrinsically and extrinsically, through these experiences a strong desire and motivation is developed (Woody, 2020). Most Middle schoolers are motivated to improve intrinsically. The internal desire to perform well is a key factor in increased learning. Miksza et al (2018) demonstrated this in their study through the microanalytical analysis portion, this helped with the development of self-regulation which increased motivation. Interventions during the study allowed researchers to teach practice strategies, discover intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, identify deficiencies, and provide opportunities for the students to learn how to apply different practice strategies to better self-regulate practice techniques.

Prichard (2021) reported that self-regulation is useful within the individual music practice framework. Self-regulated individuals tend to take an active ownership in the learning process combining motivation, self-reflection, and meta-cognitive abilities. However, it was said that inexperienced instrumental students tend to play straight through a piece of music, not paying attention to mistakes or technical aspects of the music, while more experienced musicians and even experts form a plan, set goals allowing them to really identify what practice is needed. Applying and identifying specific practice strategies which involve techniques such as repetition, slower tempos, and the whole-part-whole approach may be beneficial in helping middle school students execute more focused, self-regulated and independent practice sessions.

Miksza’s (2007) study demonstrated that in music practice is the most crucial element of a musician’s development. The need for determining which approaches and practice behaviors are effective for increasing performance achievement. Techniques to grasp these strategies are modeling, mental and physical practice, structured routines, and self-regulated behavior. The study demonstrates that these are all important elements of effective practice. The use of three required etudes, use of repetition, pre- and posttests, and self-reporting were all tools used in this study.

The study conducted by Lucas Brown featured strong influences from these studies. I plan to use practice strategies adapted for middle school instrumental students. I used three strategies in my study. The first strategy was to take a survey to identify which method of practice each participant applied while practicing (Prichard, 2020). The second strategy discovered the motivators for each student and the relation to the practice strategies that were used in each practice session. The final strategy documented whether the strategies that were taught and applied were beneficial in the individual practice sessions. The purpose of this study is to better understand which strategies are of benefit to middle school students during individual practice. This research provided insight into the practice strategies that could be used to prove which strategies are most effective for middle school band students. This will benefit my band classroom and build a stronger understanding in the many ways to instruct students on how to practice effectively.

**Method**

This study utilized a qualitative approach based on the data collected from 18 participants whose academic level was 7th grade. The 18 participants were from one Middle School in Massachusetts. The first data collected were an initial survey asking the participants what they planned on practicing, which method that they used to practice, how they practice, how many minutes they practiced, and if they felt that their practice sessions were beneficial to the group. Once the data were analyzed, an intervention was held to teach a new practice strategy. Multiple strategies were taught during the study.

**Data/Results**

The first survey produced information on which the baseline was established for understanding of practice in middle school students. Each student was required to practice 10 minutes per day. Participants understood practice, which proved different from structured practice, and most of the participants in this study understood that practice was just playing their pieces and moving on rather than repeating difficult sections. Many of the participants had a similar understanding and discussed this in their group discussions. These data allowed the researcher to teach other strategies that could increase self-regulation and efficiency during practice time.

Participants were taught how to set goals that focused on material that was personally difficult allowing them to really strategize their part into the overall work of the group. Participants’ goals reported several concepts such as staying focused while playing, building a stronger skill set in music reading, and intonation as the primary focuses of each practice section. Most of the participants in this study had little experience to no experience at all prior to this year. Throughout the course of the week, participants reported the amount of time that they practiced each day. The range of time varied from 10 to 45 minutes.

The second question asked the participants how they started each practice session. Participants reported that they either buzzed or played on their mouthpiece, then set goals by playing without warming up. Very few participants looked through their music to identify difficult sections that need work. This helped the researcher to identify the approach for addressing the strategies that were being utilized and identify how to teach strategies that might better suit the participant’s practice.

The third question in the study asked participants if they stopped to correct mistakes or if they just kept playing. 10 out of 19 participants reported that they stopped to fix the mistakes and practiced them until they could play the difficult sections successfully. This helped the researcher identify how the strategy that was taught was applied in individual practice sessions. Each participant that reported during group discussion demonstrated a much larger amount of growth in their ability to play their music and instrument. This question in the survey showed that with each new strategy that was taught some of the application that goes with that strategy was applied in the practice sessions.

Each Wednesday during the three weeks study the participants, and the researcher discussed the questions and learned a new strategy to apply to practice. The strategies that were taught were basic in application. The first strategy that was taught was to set personal goals that would best promote growth during individual practice. The participants who chose to set goals demonstrated a more focused understanding of the music individually and in rehearsal. The goal setting strategy was implemented for identification of sections in the music that were difficult and otherwise ignored. The second strategy taught was to stop when any mistakes were made or a spot was difficult, go back slow it down, and rehearse it several times until it becomes second nature. This strategy demonstrates the importance of details. Participants reported that this was beneficial to their practice and helped them really focus on the details.

The final survey indicated that all participants were able to apply each strategy successfully, however due to the number of participant submissions the results did not show significant results. Only half of the participants completed the final survey. The survey was given three different times. The final survey also showed that the amount of time spent practicing remained the same from start to end. But the way that participants practiced changed over time. However, due the lack of surveys completed during the study the results are inconclusive and will required further research at another time.

**Discussion**

The results were comparable to the study of Miksza, Blackwell, and Roseth (2018) which suggested that although there was no major growth shown, the group discussion and teaching of practice strategies helped improve the participants practice efficacy, and self-regulation. Prichard’s (2020) study also demonstrated that most young instrumentalists struggling in choosing a method of practice that is best suited for their needs. Results confirmed from the initial data found in Prichard’s findings provided an opportunity to teach appropriate practice strategies.

After the conclusion of the final survey, the researcher discussed with the participants how the different strategies were beneficial to the individuals and the ensemble. The participants are not yet able to explain how the strategies are applied to their individual practice. The results in the musical skill set are present in the way they perform their parts individually and as part of the ensemble. The biggest thing that kept participants from practicing was their busy schedules (sports, parent schedules, and other after school activities). It was reported during the group discussions “I cannot practice because I have football,” or “I cannot practice at home because I live in an apartment or my parent sleeps during the day.” However, when practice was possible, participants reported that their confidence was much higher.

The relationships between practice times and adding structure and purpose was supported in the research by Douglas Orzolek (2020). This research recorded a noticeable improvement in participant practice time. This is represented by the third question in the study (3) When you were practicing, did you stop to fix mistakes that you made? Or did you keep playing and ignore them? Orzolek identifies performance achievement as a crucial component of engagement within an ensemble and is a crucial part of the ensemble’s success. Participants became more engaged through practice and efficiency. This was affirmed by asking the participants about the effectiveness in their individual practice.

Another consideration shown in Miksza’s (2018) research was that participants who created goals during practice showed greater achievement and focus, demonstrating a much higher outcome as opposed to those who were distracted or did not set practice goals. A seventh-grade student stated that “I feel much better in the way that I practice, I was able to better focus on the areas that were most difficult for me.” Several participants shared in the group discussion that they rarely sit for a long period to practice their music, but they practice in small bursts of time. Regarding the strategies that were taught in the lessons, one participant reported “that each strategy caused them to look differently at the music and really take apart the music and work technically with the rhythm, and music itself.”

Although the results that were produced in this study showed some growth and application, the results were inconclusive because the data that were collected was limited due to participants who did not turn take the survey each week. Future researchers may consider using a control group where the participants are separated into groups to create a baseline where half of the group received intervention with practice strategy instruction, and where the other half does not receive this instruction. A longer period may also be considered which would provide an opportunity to observe how participants are applying the different techniques and strategies that are taught and how each strategy improved practice efficiency. The research warrants further study into how middle school instrumental students utilize practice strategies that are taught and how they affect self-regulated practice.

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