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Modern Bands Impact on Student Enrollment in Traditional Music Ensembles

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A Zero-Sum Game? *Modern Band's Impact on*



Student Enrollment in Traditional Music Ensembles

Bryan Powell, D.M.A. – guest contributing author

Popular music ensembles are becoming more popular in public school music education classrooms throughout the United States (Powell & Burstein, 2017). One of the reasons for the increased presence of these ensembles is the work of the non-profit organization Little Kids Rock and its efforts to expand modern band throughout the country.

Modern band programs usually include an instrumentation focused on guitar, bass, keyboards, drums, ukulele, vocals and technology, and feature popular music (often chosen by the students), as well as songwriting activities. Modern band participation in K-12 schools has grown over the last decade, and the emergence of modern band on a national level can be seen in the establishment of the NAFME All-National Honor Modern Band Ensemble, debuting at the 2019 NAFME National Conference in Orlando, FL.

As a Little Kids Rock trainer for the past five years, I have been able to facilitate more than 100 workshops for college students, K-12 teachers, and university faculty. At these workshops, one of the most common questions I am asked focuses on the potential impact that introducing a popular music ensemble or modern band will have on the enrollment numbers in bands, choirs, and orchestras. These questions usually take the form of, "If I introduce a rock band into my school, won't most of the concert band students drop out of concert band so that they can join the new rock band?"

As a person who participated in band, jazz band, choir and chamber singers when I was in high school, I knew that most students who participate in traditional music ensembles won't drop out of those ensembles to join a new ensemble because participating in band, choir and orchestra works well for those students.

I also knew from years of talking to modern band teachers that the typical student who joined a modern band ensemble in school was not a student who was already participating in band, choir, or orchestra. The typical students who were signing up for modern band classes in school were students who had never participated in school music in high school. They were typically students who were interested in music, but were not interested in participating in the traditional ensembles.

The anecdotal evidence that I had from speaking with modern band music teachers is supported by Clauhs, Beard, and Chadwick (2017) who found that the introduction of modern band ensembles into school music pro-

grams can increase overall participation in school music, especially among non-white students and students who receive free and reduced lunch assistance. The authors also found that 100% of students in grades 9 through 11 who were participating in an existing band, orchestra, or chorus "reported they would 'definitely yes' or 'probably yes' participate in these ensembles again" the next school year, despite the possibility of signing up for a modern band ensemble (p. 27).

Methodology

In response to the concerns about the introduction of popular music ensembles "cannibalizing" other school music programs, I, along with Scott Burstein, my colleague at Little Kids Rock and director of the NAFME All-National Honor Modern Band Ensemble, undertook a study of enrollment in middle and high school modern band programs affiliated with the non-profit organization Little Kids Rock. Our goal was to gain a better understanding of the impact that introducing a modern band ensemble had on existing ensembles and on participation in school music as a whole.

We chose to exclude elementary school music programs since participation in school music at the elementary level is often compulsory and not an elective. The middle and high school teachers whom we surveyed had previously participated in Little Kids Rock workshops focusing on the inclusion of modern band/popular music into school settings and were given popular music instruments (including guitar, bass, drums, keyboards, and ukulele), as well as curricular resources by Little Kids Rock for use in the classroom. All participating teachers had been teaching a modern band ensemble for at least one year. The survey responses were anonymous and no identifying information was collected from the teachers.

Participating teachers were asked about enrollment in their music programs since the introduction of a modern band ensemble elective. Teachers were also asked to specifically identify the enrollment in their traditional ensembles (bands, choirs, and orchestras) to determine if the introduction of a popular music class had a positive, negative, or neutral impact on student participation in their traditional music ensembles. We sent the survey to 437 middle and high school teachers who had been teaching modern band for at least a year. A total of 195 teachers (45%) responded to the survey.

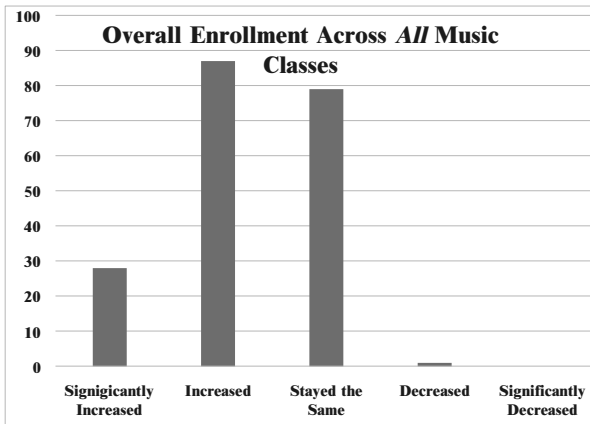
*... the introduction of
modern band ensembles
... expanded access to
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Findings

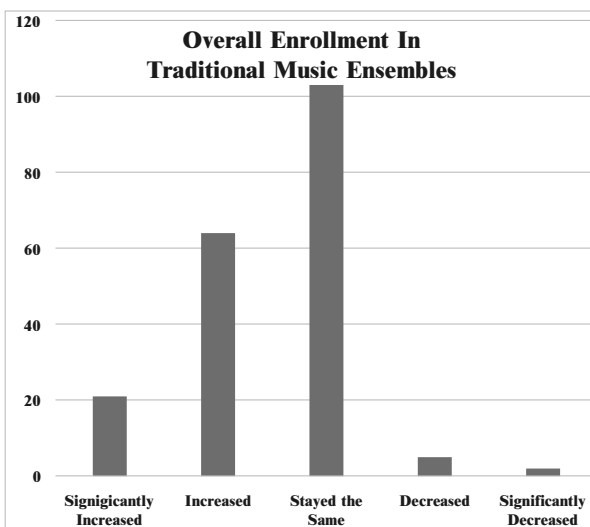
In an attempt to better understand the impact across all enrollment in music ensembles, we asked teachers to reflect on the overall enrollment across all music classes, including their modern bands and their traditional ensembles, at their school since the implementation of their modern band program. Here are the teachers' responses.

Survey Responses (n=195)



Significantly Decreased = 0 (0%)
 Decreased = 1 (0.5%)
 Stayed the Same = 79 (40.5%)
 Increased = 87 (44.6%)
 Significantly Increased = 28 (14.4%)

We also asked the teachers about enrollment in their traditional bands, choirs, and orchestras, one year after the introduction of a modern band course at their school. This question asked teachers to exclude enrollment in their modern band classes and solely examine the enrollment of students in the traditional ensembles. Did enrollment in these traditional ensembles decrease, stay the same, or increase after the introduction of the modern band course? Here are the teachers' responses.



Significantly Decreased = 2 (1%)
 Decreased = 5 (2.6%)
 Stayed the Same = 103 (52.8%)
 Increased = 64 (32.8%)
 Significantly Increased = 21 (11.8%)

Participant written responses

We provided an open-ended question for teachers to comment on their responses to the survey. Since the survey was anonymous, the following quotes are not attributable to specific teachers. Regarding the impact on music participation after the introduction of a modern band class, one teacher stated "More students want to sign up for music knowing that they can possibly play guitar, bass, and drums." Another teacher added, "We have increased the number of course offerings in music, especially non-traditional ensembles."

Some teachers offered their modern band programs after school and saw an increase in music participation. One teacher commented "OST [out of school time] has increased the influence of modern band. Many students that don't have music class during the day come for music after school." Another teacher shared, "It has diversified the music program and encourages students to stay after school for modern band as a club."

Several teachers commented on successes they experienced with integrating modern band with traditional ensembles. "Modern band is after school, and more kids want to participate in modern band and choir since the choir sings the songs for the rock band," commented one teacher, while another stated, "We have seen more interest in after school chorus this year since we've introduced the guitars last year and the drum set and piano keyboards this year."

Increased participation by students who were not previously participating in school music was another common theme from teachers. One teacher commented, "More variety has led to a greater exposure to music for all students, including students without interest in traditional band." Another teacher echoed this sentiment and stated, "Modern band programming has added an extra opportunity for students to participate in a program of music learning. Modern band is attracting students who are not already in band and choir."

Decreased enrollment experiences

One teacher (0.5%) reported that overall participation in music ensembles decreased after the introduction of modern band, and a small number of teachers (3.6%) stated that participation in traditional ensembles decreased or significantly decreased after the introduction of modern band at their schools. "There has been a dramatic decrease

in concert band and instrumental lessons. Since many students are being reached through modern band, administration does not see the need to support traditional music," reported one teacher.

Another teacher shared that interest and enrollment in the orchestra was declining, which led to the creation of a music position to teach modern band. This teacher explained, "The school did offer orchestra until declining interest and enrollment led to the creation of my position." Another teacher commented that the increased interest in playing guitar in the modern band led to a decrease in the school's concert band program. "From last year to this year, we have gone from two sections of classroom guitar to three, due to increased demand. Consequently, though, concert band classes have seen a dramatic drop, from three sections to one."

Discussion

"Taking popular music seriously will draw into the educational realm many students who are traditionally and currently excluded" (Bowman, 2004, pp. 43-44).

The findings of the survey support the idea that band, orchestra, and/or chorus ensemble directors do not need to fear that modern band programs will weaken enrollment in existing school music ensembles. The findings of Clauhs, Beard, and Chadwick (2017) supported the same findings on a smaller scale.

Indeed, as reported in that article, the introduction of modern band ensembles into school music programs brought in new students who were not participating in the school's traditional music ensembles. Instead of cannibalizing students from existing ensembles, the introduction of modern band ensembles into the district expanded access to school music for more students without negatively impacting student enrollment in the traditional ensembles.

As music educators look for ways to get more students involved in school music and seek to expand access to a more diverse student body, modern band ensembles should be one of the solutions that educators consider. Music teachers can include more students - and new students - in school music through the inclusion of culturally relevant, student-centered, and inclusive music ensembles. ||

References

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