

Thesis Advisor: Frank Martignetti

Build Back Better: The COVID-19 Pandemic
and My Evolution as an Urban Music Educator

Michael A. Roche

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....4

Chapter 1: “Who or What Do I teach?”.....5-10

Chapter 2: Literature Review “Urban Education: Inequalities and Covid-19”.....11-19

Chapter 3: Results and Implications.....20-27

References.....28-29

Abstract

This thesis is an action research study exploring the impact the pandemic has had on my own teaching, and more generally, education and music education in the city where I teach. Data includes my own reflections on the pandemic, my own evolution as a teacher over the past eleven years, as well as interviews conducted with colleagues, parents, and students. This study seeks to explore the following questions: How has the experience of schooling during the pandemic changed my students and I? Could aspects of this experience change music education for the better going forward? The study is significant because, as Fitzpatrick (2015) says, the real experts on urban education are the students and teachers themselves. It is also a primary source historical document chronicling a significant time in history, both general and of our profession. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified long-standing inequalities in American society, and the community I serve. Technology served both as a barrier to learning and an opportunity for learning during the pandemic. As a teacher., the pandemic changed my priorities and approach to teaching music, causing me to move beyond unexamined assumptions. This has implications for my future practice as well as that of my colleagues.

CHAPTER ONE

Who or What Do I Teach?

Introduction:

“Do you love teaching band? Or do you love teaching kids?” My advisor asked me this question during a summer 2020 independent study. Since 2008, I have taught elementary and middle school band in Bridgeport, Connecticut public schools. In January 2020, I began my master’s degree at the University of Bridgeport. A few weeks later, my schools, the University and the entire world shut down, bringing unprecedented change. It quickly became clear that the ways in which I had taught and engaged my students in the past would not work for the foreseeable future. Like my colleagues everywhere, I grieved the loss of face-to-face teaching and large ensemble rehearsals.

“Do you love teaching band? Or do you love teaching kids?” This question stunned me, forcing me to look deeply at my own blind spots and assumptions as a teacher. How would I function for another year being unable to draw on my strongest skill set and methods of teaching? My first impulse was to state that I love teaching kids. I remember being a baseball camp counselor when I was fourteen; I always loved teaching, regardless of the discipline. It was this realization that allowed me to move beyond the temporary loss of something I hold dear and find other methods to engage my students. The past school year has helped me reaffirm that I love being a teacher. With all the difficulties, challenges, stress, and grief this year has brought, teaching and working with my students has brought me joy and made me a better version of myself.

As “normal” life begins to slowly resume, I take stock of lessons learned. This thesis is an action research study chronicling the evolution of my professional practice, along with that of colleagues, during a unique time in history. I interviewed a kindergarten teacher, third grade teacher, music teacher, private teacher/college teacher, two administrators of a non-profit arts group, two student participants in that group, and an arts administrator. Interviewees were chosen to reflect a wide range of ages taught; due to the limitations of time and the pandemic, they were an opportunity sample. Interviews were transcribed using a transcription feature in Soundtrap, and then proofread. Analysis of the interviews involved reading through the transcriptions and listening to the interviews many times. One also might view this thesis as a first draft of historical research regarding this unique period in music education.

Chapter one presents the topic, method, and situates me (the practitioner-researcher), my school, and the study, in context. Chapter two explores relevant literature from urban education and music education. Chapter three analyzes lessons learned from my experience, and the voices of other urban teachers and students whom I interviewed, making recommendations for the future of music education.

Method

This is a qualitative, action research study in which I reflect on my own evolution as a teacher. This evolution dates back to the beginning of my time teaching in Bridgeport and was accelerated because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research examines individuals’ experiences, perspectives, beliefs, and actions and their implications, with a focus on detailed description of a particular context. Phillips (2010) defines action research as:

Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment, to gather information about the ways that their particular schools operate, how they teach and how well their students learn. This information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment, and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved (Phillips, 2010).

My reflection on my own professional practice and how it has evolved seeks to improve my ability to be a reflective practitioner. Interviews carried out seek to understand how my school and community have been affected by the pandemic, and understand the sorts of changes that are happening, or needed, to serve students better.

The goal of this action research is to plot a course for rebuilding our music program and school culture in the aftermath of the pandemic. Interviews are a central part of qualitative research methods. Thus, I interviewed colleagues with a wide range of perspectives. I interviewed a kindergarten teacher, third grade teacher, music teacher, private teacher/college teacher, two administrators of a non-profit arts group, two student participants in that group, and an arts administrator.

Interview subjects were selected purposefully to reflect a wide range of experience and different perspectives. I thought it valuable to hear from two teenage students, a parent, teachers of different aged students and craft, and administrators who hold a wider view of the impact of the pandemic. While interviewees were chosen to reflect a wide range, due to the limitations of time and the pandemic, they were an opportunity sample. Interviews were recorded on a mobile phone, then imported into Soundtrap. They were transcribed using a transcription feature in Soundtrap, and then proofread. Analysis of the interviews involved reading through the transcriptions and listening to the interviews many times. In chapter three, I discuss themes that

emerged from these interviews, and their implications for how we can shape our school culture and music department moving forward.

Situating the Researcher and Site

I am a white, straight, middle aged, male who grew up in a four-person, middle class family and community. I first began teaching in Bridgeport, the largest city in Connecticut, and one of the poorest communities in the state, more than a decade ago. Bridgeport is a longtime industrial center that saw manufacturing jobs vanish, leading to extensive poverty, unemployment, blight, and middle-class flight. According to City-Data.com, children live below the poverty line in Bridgeport at more than twice the rate of Connecticut at large, with 40.2 percent of students in Bridgeport versus 13.8 percent statewide. According to the World Population Review, Bridgeport, Connecticut has a population of 143,653. The demographics of this population are 40.8% Hispanic or Latino, 40.4% White, 35.1% Black or African-American.

The new school building shared by Barnum and Waltersville Schools is in its eleventh year of service. In school year 2020-21, 597 students are enrolled at Barnum School. Barnum's student body is 65.5% Hispanic, 23.5% African-American and 9.2% white. 77% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. 30.2% of students at Barnum are students with exceptionalities. 25.8% of students are English learners and 24.8% of students are chronically absent. The staff at Barnum School is 69.2% white, 25% Hispanic, and 5.8 African-American. In school year 2020-21, Waltersville School has 493 students enrolled. Waltersville's student body is 60.6% Hispanic, 32.5% African-American, and 5.7% white. 83% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. 22.1% of students at Waltersville are students with exceptionalities.

15.4% of students are English language learners and 26% of students are chronically absent.

Staff at Waltersville are 63.4% white, 22% Hispanic, and 12.2% African-American.

When I came to Bridgeport, I was three years removed from my undergraduate work at the University of New Hampshire. Upon graduation, I had worked for five months as a permanent substitute chorus teacher at North Haven Middle School, I then went on to teach for two years in Catholic schools as a band director, employed by a subcontractor called Future Musicians. Future Musicians is a company that provides band programs to Catholic schools by charging families tuition to be part of the band program. Following these experiences teaching and learning in relatively privileged environments, I was hired to teach band in Bridgeport at Waltersville School and Barnum School, two K-8 schools which share a single building.

As I began teaching in Bridgeport, I carried assumptions about urban students, based on my own experiences, education, and upbringing. Early in my career I believe my students sensed that and were less receptive to my efforts. Many students were dismissive of the band program; I would tell them I did not value our band program as a middle school student either, but I grew to appreciate it later in high school and hoped this story would help students see that perhaps dismissing band was short sighted. Large performing ensembles are vital to a thriving music program, but as a young teacher, I believed that they were the best possible experience we could offer for all students. I now see that, while these experiences are valuable, that they do not engage many students. Music education can and must be so much broader; for example, music technology can be just as beneficial to students as band, orchestra, or chorus. I saw my students respond with excitement as we explored music technology with Soundtrap.

Kids Empowered by Your Support

Kids Empowered by Your Support (KEYS) is a non-profit organization that provides musical enrichment opportunities to students in Bridgeport. KEYS' mission is to bring free one-to-one instrument lessons and group music instruction to underserved inner-city children in Bridgeport who have no other access to this empowering life experience. To pay the professional teachers, KEYS solicits donors to fund the program. As the pandemic spread through the world, KEYS looked to continue their work virtually. This group is worth mentioning because they led the effort to continue music education when we were forced into lockdowns. KEYS was founded in 2004 because the founder believes all children benefit from music, particularly in the form of private lessons. It started as a private lesson scholarship program but soon grew to include an orchestra, then a concert band, chorus, and, prior to the onset of the pandemic, added a jazz band.

Conclusion

In January of 2020, I began my master's degree at the University of Bridgeport. As I was beginning classes, I started hearing news about a rapidly spreading new virus in other parts of the world that eventually made its way to our shores. When it did arrive to the United States things suddenly changed. Little did I know how this virus would change my teaching, my graduate studies and education at large. That summer in my graduate studies, I began exploring literature on urban music education. I was most taken with Fitzpatrick (2015), whose writing began to challenge my approach to teaching.

Every school setting and music program is different. Urban schools are not “less than” schools in any other context any more than they are “more than.” All schools, in all contexts, are different from one another, and to be most effective, every music teacher in every setting must develop a contextually specific approach to their pedagogy (Fitzpatrick, 2015).

As I read this, I began to realize that my own training and environment I knew as a musician did not reflect my students’ experiences. This had me reimagining what our music department at Waltersville and Barnum can be in the wake of the pandemic. Research in music education and urban education provided fuel for this visioning.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban Education: Inequalities and Covid-19

Long standing inequalities in urban education were amplified by the pandemic. While many professionals were faced with the challenge and opportunity of working from home, managing child-care, and supervising schooling, poorer Americans faced far greater challenges. Many were laid off, many were required to continue to report to work in public-facing jobs, both essential and service. Educators saw some of these inequalities manifest as schools suddenly tried to implement distance learning. Teachers saw students without privacy, quiet or a workspace in small apartments, students who did not have the ability to have a parent home to monitor learning, and students who simply disappeared from school.

Let me start by suggesting that remote teaching is insufficient for all students. Learning is far more than simply the transmission of information or the completion of written assignments. Further, we are social creatures and need the social interactions being at school provides students at all stages of development. An overarching theme that emerged from interviews conducted was concerns about the mental health of students, parents, and teachers. The pandemic and our response negatively affected many Americans' mental health.

Catherine Malboeuf-Hurtubise (2021) conducted a study in 2020 suggesting interventions to help elementary students cope with mental health struggles brought on by the pandemic. In this study the author states that preliminary evidence suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic has

had a negative impact on children's mental health, especially on anxiety, depression, or behavioral disorders. She then goes on to discuss two practices: philosophy for children (P4C), and mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) and claims both methods show promise to help students cope with mental health struggles (Malboeuf-Hurtubise, 2021):

Results from this study suggest that, in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic a P4C intervention centered around COVID-19 related themes may be helpful to reduce mental health difficulties, that a MBI may be useful to satisfy basic psychological need (BPN) and that both interventions were easy to offer online to elementary school students (Malboeuf-Hurtubise, 2021).

Interventions like the ones discussed in this study will be helpful for students struggling with mental health related to the pandemic. I have never struggled with mental health, but I have felt the stress and the weight of the pandemic to make me sometimes short tempered and when I sense my emotions moving in this direction, a quick quiet time alone and focusing on my breath can help me get centered.

This study proposes possible mental health services for elementary age children in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Both P4C and MBIs were adapted from the *Mission Meditation Manual*, an evidence-based intervention-based mindfulness meditation and positive psychology, adapted to fit elementary school children's developmental needs and attention span (Malboeuf-Hurtubise, 2021). The authors of this study describe a discussion format where a trained professional facilitates open ended conversations on themes related to COVID-19. Examples of these themes are: "Why do we go to school?" sadness and fear, personal freedom and rules, aging and dying. MBIs are more meditative in nature. Mindfulness refers to paying attention to the present moment, open-mindedly, and without judgement:

They are meant to teach children to focus on their sensory experiences, recognize and accept their thoughts and emotions, leading to better emotional regulation skills (Halboeuf-Hurtubise et al. 2017b). Result from meta-analyses and reviews have shown that MBIs are considered useful to decrease mental health problems, such as anxiety and inattention (Carsly et al, 2018; Zenner et al., 2014).

The author of this study cautions that, while initial findings indicate that these two types of mindfulness activities had positive effects on the students participating in these interventions, more study is still needed, including a larger sample size. There were new stressors for all students, but urban students had to contend with far more.

Gary Orfield discusses how, in the early 1990s, segregation in both housing and school demographics grew for the first time since the Supreme Court overturned school segregation laws in 1954. This, along with other factors, led to a steady trend of middle-class families moving out of urban areas and into suburban areas, causing our schools to become more segregated along racial lines. Poverty is a strong force that keeps people in its grasp over generations, and we see this reality reflected in the way our society is structured:

Segregated schools are unequal not because of anything in race but because they reflect the long-term corrosive impact on neighborhoods and families from a long history of racial discrimination in many aspects of life. (Orfield, 1996).

The history of racial discrimination in our nation is at the root of the struggle urban families experience. To begin to heal, we need to understand our history of racial discrimination and empower communities of color to thrive.

This history helps explain the inequalities that existed for decades before the pandemic, and were exacerbated during the pandemic. As I read Orfeld, I came to see the struggles my students go through. While a part of me wants to see our country and community as fair and

just, I must believe what I see before my eyes, and the reality is, we are still a long way from that ideal. Students in poverty have so much more to overcome than students who starts from a middle-class background. The reality is that we need to continue to offer more resources and educational opportunities to districts with high rates of poverty. Education is primarily funded through city property taxes, but that ensures inequality, and is often still not enough to adequately provide a proper education. Poor funding of schools is a major issue in urban education (Fitzpatrick, 2015).

In urban schools, most students from impoverished backgrounds are students of color. The American teaching force is overwhelmingly white and middle class. Many of these educators see diversity as a challenge, rather than a simple reality or even an advantage.

Lisa Delpit's classic *Other People's Children* challenges that deficit view, and further challenged how I approach teaching in deeply meaningful ways. Delpit says:

We can continue to view diversity as a problem, attempting to force all differences into standardized boxes. Or we can recognize that diversity of thought, language, and worldview in our classroom cannot only provide an exciting educational setting but can also prepare children for the richness of living in an increasingly diverse national community (Delpit, 2006).

A thought occurred to me as I read this. In believing so strongly that my craft was so central to a thriving music program I may have been attempting to force all differences into standardized boxes. I now see that I was blinding myself to what my teaching can look like if it were reflective of my students' culture.

In Delpit (2006), an African-American female teacher in a multicultural urban elementary school is talking about her experiences, in discussions with her predominantly white fellow

teachers, about how they should organize reading instruction to best serve students of color. The woman goes on to say:

When you're talking to white people they still want it to be their way. You can try to talk to them and give the examples, but they're so headstrong, they think they know what's best for everybody, for everybody's children they won't listen. White folks are going to do what they want to do anyway. (Delpit, 2006)

I could not help but see myself in this recounting. Teaching in a mostly minority impoverished community, and being a white male from the suburbs, I often brought my assumptions that large, traditional performing ensembles are central to a thriving music program with me, into our school. I believed so adamantly that, at times, I would fail to create strong relationships with students at the expense of trying to promote band. A more wise and seasoned approach would have been to put the relationship first and the craft second.

I felt the need to reimagine our music department and how it might grow past the pandemic. I committed to exploring lessons in which we learn and practice both writing and performing raps. Early experimenting with this lesson during the pandemic has shown positive results with students learning interdisciplinary skills in music class. An example of an interdisciplinary skill is rhyming from language arts. More importantly though, when I introduced rap into my music class, I began to see students show more engagement than when I had not been willing to use rap to connect with my students. Culturally responsive pedagogy requires us to draw on aspects of students' lives in planning instruction.

Fitzpatrick (2015) brings attention to many factors negatively affecting students in urban districts. These include stereotypes held by educators, lack of funding, and other factors. She says:

Although we cannot ourselves change the educational system, nor can we rectify the profound injustices and inequalities that so many of our students have experienced, we do have at our disposal a subject matter so powerful that many of us would say it has made a substantial difference in our lives and in the beauty, we perceive in the world. (Fitzpatrick, 2015).

I recall being asked if my music education reflected my home life. And the answer was that yes, it did. This is the reason music was such a profound aspect of my youth. Does my music class reflect my students home life? It does not. Too much of my approach to teaching music is based in my own lived experience and not enough on my students lived experiences. I need to incorporate more aspects of my students' culture into the music curriculum. This will include music technology and the most popular musical style in the world-rap. If I make my music class more reflective of my students' culture it will be a more profound experience for them.

This quote from Fitzpatrick is profound. It highlights how impactful music can be. I read this at a time when I was thinking through how I would approach teaching music during the pandemic. As I was considering what our music department would look like as school reopened, I realized that music must be so much broader than what my lived experience taught me. While performing ensembles are wonderful and important, there are people that would thrive in other musical environments such as music technology. Our music department must also reflect the culture of the students we teach. Fitzpatrick also asks a great question, what does success mean to you? She then goes on to challenge the reader to think about success not in terms of a one size fits all concept. But rather, begin to design a curriculum tailored to the community one teaches. This led me to be willing to envision something that looks different than what I have traditionally been doing because of my own experience as a musician. This spurred me to look at my

program with fresh eyes and see beyond the problem of losing our performing ensembles in school even as this was a huge threat. What effect will COVID-19 have on music education once lockdown and remote learning have passed?

Lewer (2020) explored the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on music education. He pointed out that the coronavirus pandemic had and would continue to have an impact on all aspects of music education: curriculum, singing in schools, music making and especially extracurricular activities, learning instruments and examinations.

I have seen these effects firsthand in the past year. Our school band has been disbanded; singing in schools is no longer allowed when there are too many people in the same room. The music curriculum has been transformed from a focus on group performance to using technology to teach music. While I was initially grieving losing performing ensembles for the year, using Soundtrap to arrange songs or create a podcast has created a high level of engagement.

The heart of the school is missing, which had measured the impact of COVID-19, by collating 1,300 responses from members of the music-teaching profession who worked in schools across the UK. He said that the survey had revealed that 10 % of primary and secondary schools did not teach class music at all, even though it was a requirement in the curriculum, and schools had reported that, as a result of their lack of access to technology and the resources they needed, many children had not been given any music lessons throughout the closure of schools. (Lewer, 2020).

While this was a study done in the UK, I do believe it is indicative of what we have experienced in Bridgeport during the early days of the pandemic. As a result of our lack of access to technology, we were unable to conduct live music lessons remotely in the early days of the pandemic. It will be our responsibilities as music teachers to bring the heart of the school back after the pandemic and do so in a way that reflects the students' culture.

Moving on to relevant material as it relates to music and technology, in an article by Julia T. Shaw, she discusses how choral teaching has changed because of the pandemic.

As choral educators have explored the possibility of creating virtual choirs by editing recordings contributed by individual singers, many have noted that this process cannot entirely replicate in-person group singing because the singers' experience remains solitary. Even as we long for the social connection afforded by choral singing, the opportunity to focus on individual singers' contributions can be thought of as an opportunity. Covid-19 may have prompted greater emphasis on listening to, providing feedback on, and affirming the value of each individual voice within our choirs. Activities such as the following will continue to hold value once traditional choirs resume. (Shaw, 2020).

This was very similar to what KEYS has done since the onset of the pandemic. To put together group performances during the pandemic, we provided the students with music and a recording to play along with while they recorded themselves. We then took those recordings and arranged them to appear as if they were all playing together. Shaw points out that this cannot entirely replicate in-person performing as the performers remain solitary. Many students whom I spoke to about these performances agreed that they were not the same as an in-person live concert.

Shaw then goes on to discuss two types of activities that she has used in her own practice during the pandemic. One such example is a focus on individual recordings so that students can receive feedback on their personal performance whereas prior to the pandemic choral directors would provide feedback to sections of the ensemble as opposed to individual members. This can be a positive development that can be beneficial to young musicians in a post pandemic world. When our band does resume at Waltersville and Barnum school I intend to use recording assignments on regular basis to document progress and provide meaningful and individualized feed back to my students.

CONCLUSION

Inequality has existed for decades and was strongly amplified because of the global pandemic. Students in Bridgeport would often not have sufficient access to technology and internet to allow for distance learning to occur. As this problem became clear, the district addressed this problem by providing free hot spots and free ChromeBooks to older students, and tablets to younger students. This did make the distance learning we provided as a district possible. However, there was still a substantial portion of our student population that did not even attend virtually throughout the year. Another issue this pandemic has laid bare is that students with strong family support were able to weather the storm better than students without strong family support. Parents who were able to spend the time with their children and supervise their learning performed better than those with parents who may have had to work during those hours. Our district is pushing to have full in person learning for all students by April 19th.

It has been more two weeks since this date has passed. While there is still some trepidation amongst the community as it relates to COVID-19, there is a sense of optimism that we are approaching a light at the end of the tunnel. Students are generally happy to be together and see their peers and teachers.

My sense from speaking to students, is that in September there will be an enthusiasm for performing ensembles. Students often would ask when can we start band again? My answer was when we can do band or chorus safely. Currently the CDC guidelines do not allow for large group performances. I believe those events will be among the last to return even though there is a yearning for these things to return. When they finally do, there will be a lot of enthusiasm. My hope is that we will be able to hold onto the positive things we have achieved during the

pandemic, such as wide access to technology. I also hope we will also hold fast to the things we lost and have a new appreciation for each other. In the face of this deadly pandemic, students being away from each other has caused a great deal of social emotional health issues to come to the fore. Young children need to learn the social skills of cooperation by being with other children their age. And music programs provide a positive social and emotional outlet for students to enjoy being a part of and grow together. While there were many moments where I was in despair this past year, I now have a sense of optimism that we will emerge from this shared struggle stronger and better for it.

The authors I have mentioned, challenged me to grow in the direction creating a cultural relevant curriculum at Barnum and Waltersville School. While there is little I can do about the daily condition of my students' lives, I do have at my disposal the awesome power of music, and if I can teach in such a way that our music program better reflects the lives of my students, I may be able to provide them with something beautiful and meaningful.

As a music teacher I have learned that while my general focus on large, traditional performing ensemble being overwhelmingly central to a music education was flawed, I have come to understand that there are so many more methods of instilling skills valuable to students aside from the performing ensemble. My exploration of teaching musical skills using various technology has given me a new-found appreciation of this type of class. I urge my fellow music educators, as we embark on an everchanging landscape be well versed in a variety of musical disciplines. Develop a skill set of variety that will make you an effective music educator in all different settings because our art form is always evolving. Always remember to look for the best in people especially when it is difficult and move forward together.

As I conclude the literature review, I reflect on what these readings have taught me. Delpit (2006) and Fitzpatrick (2015) both challenged me to look beyond my own lived experience and consider how I might shape a music classroom that more accurately reflects my students lived experience. Lewer (2020) reflected many of my own struggles as we fought through the early months of the pandemic. Shaw (2020) provides examples of how the technology we have at our disposal can be used to continue to build back our musical ensembles in the wake of the pandemic. Orfield (1996) provides us with historical context of how segregation grew through the early eighties and has only persisted to the present day. Malboeuf-Hurtubise (2021) offers potential interventions that may help children that are struggling with mental health because of the COVID-19 lockdowns. An analysis of the interview data collected, and reflections on my own experience, chart a path as to how we might improve our professional practice and serve our students better.

CHAPTER 3

Results and Implications

It has been a humbling experience to reflect on my own evolution as a teacher and how the pandemic shifted my perspective on how to approach teaching music. In this chapter I will offer lessons I learned throughout my first ten years teaching in Bridgeport, and this past year teaching during the pandemic. I will discuss common themes that have emerged from interviews I conducted: mental health concerns, and technology functioning as a barrier, but also as an opportunity. Finally, I will consider what the short and long-term effects of the pandemic might be for music education in the city of Bridgeport.

Mental Health and Well-Being

Many interview subjects discussed social and emotional well-being as a major concern of theirs as they were navigating the pandemic. A parent from Barnum School, when asked how the past year had been for her children, said:

It has been very rough staying home and working at home. After school activities are done through Zoom, so it has put a stress and put some weight on them, and put some mental illness that came with it. Honestly, it's something that we kind of have to work together as a community, but as a parent I see the toll it has taken on my kids (personal communication).

This interviewee makes a correlation between the onset of virtual learning and some mental illness that came with it in relation to one of her children. This anecdote reinforces the fact that we are social creatures and need the nurturing environment in-person learning provides for all students. This family has opted to keep their children in school when the building has

been open. This indicates this family believes the cost to their child's mental health outweighed the risk of contracting COVID-19 at school.

While discussing mental health struggles, a fellow music teacher mentioned how returning to school might be a joyous occasion for some, it can also be difficult for others. "Some students may be embarrassed and suffer from anxiety because of their appearance having put on weight during the pandemic" (personal communication). This is a consequence of the pandemic that I had not considered. Factors beyond the pandemic affected students' mental health, too. One twelfth grade student participating in the KEYS program mentioned mental health struggles he experienced that were triggered by the killing of George Floyd in the summer of 2020.

Two brothers, twelfth grade and tenth grade participants in the Keys program, spoke about the impact the murder of George Floyd by a police officer has had on them. Both spoke of the emotional impact this crime had on their mental well-being. They said they would just want to get off Facebook and distract themselves with video games or play basketball with each other. This was an attempt to escape and cope with not just the pandemic, but also police violence against communities of color.

There is no shortage of incidents in which minority communities have tragic experiences with law enforcement. It seems every day we hear of a new incident in the news in which a person of color is either hurt or killed at the hands of law enforcement. Even as the officer was convicted on all counts, there were three or four more incidents scattered through the country that same week. This reality is continuing to contribute to negative mental health outcomes particularly for students of color.

I was working with the older brother in private lessons at the time, and I recall being unsure how I should handle his lesson the following week after George Floyd was killed. I remember offering to talk if he wanted, but he was quick to say, “I just want to play trombone.” I wondered if maybe I should not have offered, but with the benefit of hindsight I believe this was just his way coping. A private teacher/college adjunct professor, and music technology specialist also mentioned that in private lessons, he would try to pick up on student’s body language. If the student seemed to be feeling down, he would offer to listen to them if they wanted to talk. These are both instances where our students were dealing with emotional health and receiving support from a trusted adult.

Teachers must continue to monitor student behavior for mental health struggles and school systems must anticipate this and have the support staff that specialize in skills meant to help students struggling with their mental health. Programs like those mentioned in the study philosophy for children and mindfulness during COVID-19, would help schools support students who may struggle with anxiety, depression or behavioral disorders in the aftermath of the pandemic. Supporting and promoting positive mental health for students as we slowly recover from the pandemic will be a key part of building back our school community.

Technology As A Barrier and An Opportunity

I am reminded of a time when I was no more than two or three years into teaching in Bridgeport when a parent asked me about potential for music production and rap being part of the music classroom. I remember saying something akin to “I’m sorry but that is not something I know a lot about and I cannot promise it will be a part of our music class.” I wish I had the

perspective I have now, where I can see a program with music technology classes and rap being a part of music curriculum. I did a rap lesson this year with my seventh-grade students as a part of our use of Soundtrap and this seemed to foster a positive relationship with this class. This experience has me reimagining what our music program can look like. I am certain the large ensembles will return but I can see offering more classes built around music production which will have rap as a part of the class. Large ensemble playing is wonderful, but it is not for everyone and this year I have seen students who would likely shy away from band, really excel using Soundtrap to arrange songs and create podcasts. This made me realize that music could be taught in a different way and forced me to reconsider how my music program can grow in a post pandemic world. I now see music technology being a considerable component of our school music curriculum.

While technology has provided us an opportunity it also has shown that it does not replace the experience of learning in a physical classroom with peers. Each teacher interviewed admitted they felt they were not providing the same level of education to their online learners as they were providing for their in-person learners. As the school year closed out its winter months and began to look towards spring, more families began to send their students back for in-person learning. This indicates families were ready for schools to open because it is what is best for their children. Our school has gone from allowing 50 percent of the students in the building two months ago, to now allowing 100 percent in the building and to remain home families need a medical reason to keep their children home to do virtual learning. As of the fall our district will no longer be offering a virtual model of education.

Effects on Education and Music Education in Bridgeport

Like the entire world, we closed our physical school doors in March of 2020. From then to the end of that school year we as a district sent home learning packets that students were to complete at home for credit. Students did not have access to technology, hindering our ability to conduct live instruction remotely. As a result, our district mandated that teachers send home learning packets for students to complete for credit. When it was apparent that the lockdown was going to be a much longer than initially thought, I needed to look for other options to teach. I decided to use what I was learning in a graduate vocal pedagogy class to teach students how to develop their vocal health and strengthen their singing voices. Once again, I found myself trusting that students were doing the music packets. The music packets were guided vocal practice in written form. Students were given instructions to do familiar vocal warm-ups and encouraged to sing familiar songs. Students could submit videos of themselves singing. I was not able to evaluate the work because most students were not submitting video recordings of themselves singing. Some did, but I think the level of fear and uncertainty left people feeling there were more important things to do with their time besides the busy work packets that schools were sending home. I cannot reasonably argue that this is even teaching. As the summer progressed word came to the staff that we would be opening our building in a hybrid model. We would close again in three months and go full remote, but instead of learning packets each student was given a Chromebook or iPad and if a family needed access to internet, they were also given free Wi-Fi hotspots. While this seemed to make remote learning possible, it was still a long way from being a proper education. Teachers would struggle to keep people at home equally engaged as the students in-person with them. Students at home would be in close quarters with other siblings making it difficult to concentrate on what their teacher was saying on

their Chromebook. Students particularly in middle school would not want to put on their cameras. I can say in no uncertain terms that students need to be in school with children their own age. Remote learning was a failure. Too many students would not show up to virtual classes. It was too easy for students to get distracted, and teachers struggled to meaningfully engage students remotely in the same fashion they engaged the in-person learners.

Private lessons over video chat are one method of teaching that works well. Large group gatherings and performances are still a distance off, but slowly life is starting to come back to “normal”. However, there will surely be new norms that music teachers will need to adopt. For our Barnum and Waltersville school community, I foresee concerts having smaller audiences at first, but having those same concerts broadcast live stream or shared on public platforms. This will be a method we use to share our performances with our school community. I also plan to implement recording assignments for my own band program so that I may give more individualized feedback on a student’s playing.

As we began welcoming full in-person learning on April 19th, 2021, there was a sense of relief from students and teachers alike. We were all excited to see one another and my hope is that we have a newfound appreciation for working together to build back our school community. One positive affect the pandemic brought with it was getting access to technology for all students. I heard many teachers say it is a shame that it took a pandemic for this to happen, and in fact it is. Technology will be essential infrastructure for learning in the twenty first century. I would argue that it was essential ten or twenty years ago, but we must look forward and maintain music technology as a part of our curriculum.

Using Soundtrap was perhaps my greatest success story for this school year. It is a web-based virtual recording and mixing studio that allows students to create their own songs by layering, transposing, and selecting different programmed music loops and building songs. We also used Soundtrap to create student podcasts on topics chosen by the students. This creative project with student chosen topics has created excitement among the students. Students are still insecure and are hesitant to have their podcast played for the whole class, but they are engaged in their work. Soundtrap has allowed me to assign, collect and view student work then provide them with meaningful feedback. I intend to keep Soundtrap as a part of my general music study for middle school students.

Prior to the pandemic our school concerts were difficult to put together. Our audience would be as big as we could jam into our small cafeteria. We do not have an exclusive performing arts theatre or auditorium. We have a cafeteria that we can transform into an auditorium. In responding to asking what concerts look like in a world post pandemic? A fellow music teacher at Waltersville with twenty years of experience referred to how our concerts were a hot mess. Too big and too many transitions, with too large an audience this leading to audience behavior that was challenging. Making our way out of the pandemic will provide us with an opportunity to make changes to our music department and make concerts more manageable and less stressful. As we come out of the pandemic, we will likely have a limit to our in-person audience for concerts. We are also actively looking into live streaming small concerts with smaller audiences. Another pair of interviewees who spoke of live streaming smaller concerts in the future were the director and assistant director of KEYS.

In an interview with the director and assistant director of KEYS, I asked how much they were growing prior to the pandemic, and how many students they lost during the pandemic. They were servicing about seven hundred students prior to the pandemic. They now continue to teach about half of that population through virtual lessons and offer opportunities for their students to perform virtual concerts and recitals. Both interviewees stated that the reason they were able to maintain music lessons and virtual performances was because of strong family support for the students who stayed on to participate in music lessons. The students this program lost could have had any number of reasons they chose to stop participating in the program. This does however draw into question the level of privilege associated with having the family support required to participate in performing ensembles. If school-based music education is for all, it must be much broader than only performing ensembles. A question I had for them was how have your donors responded to our efforts during the pandemic? Both interviewees said, “their donors have enjoyed being able to see the performances virtually, and this will likely be a method we use to share our concerts in the future.” (personal communication)

Virtual performances and live streaming concerts will likely be how we approach performance opportunities in 2021-2022 school year. While there is talk of Broadway opening to full capacity in September, I believe education will take a more cautious approach. Allowing students to perform in groups but limit the capacity of the audience and use technology to share those performances with audiences at home. As we have seen over the past month more families are opting to send their students to learn in-person at school and in the fall school districts will no longer be required to provide remote instruction. I believe this is what needs to happen. If families want to home school there is an avenue for that, but we as a district could not replace in-person learning with a remote or hybrid model. This is one lesson the pandemic has taught us;

you cannot replace the experience of learning in person with a form of remote instruction. We did the best we could given the circumstances, but ultimately it did not work well.

How has the pandemic accelerated my evolution as a music teacher?

Prior to the pandemic and my graduate studies, I would describe myself as a band director with limited skills in other musical disciplines. I was fortunate to be in the company of great music teachers who were also band centric in their training, but over the course of years grew into accomplished and skilled general music teachers. This inspired me down the path of pursuing more knowledge and skills to help me become a more well-rounded music educator. I have only just begun this evolution and I hope to continue to improve my fluency in music technology and become a better overall music educator for the next chapter of my career.

A few general words of wisdom, stay humble and be willing to see things from your students' view. All teaching is built around our relationships, so create and foster strong relationships with your students and their families and you will be a successful teacher. Be optimistic! Always see the best in people especially when it is difficult. People will challenge your patience so keep your cool and teach from a place of love. Your students may at times lash out at, and this will be difficult, never take it personal. Be willing to re-envision how you approach your craft and be willing to evolve and grow. In the case of a young music teacher, be adaptable to many different music learning environments. Be fluent in music technology and recording platforms.

I thank you for reading this action research study. I hope you can glean some insight and inspiration that will serve you as you embark on your own teaching career. My final thoughts to

share with you, stay humble. Always be willing to shift your perspective. Education is not one size fits all. We are all individuals and bring with us our own experience. Do not be blinded by your own experience and learn to see the world from your students' point of view. Build strong relationships with your students and their families. See the best in people especially when it is hard and teach from a place of love.

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