

11. MOTIVATION AND CREATIVITY IN WORKING WITH POP/ROCK/JAZZ BANDS OF SECONDARY AND HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL

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Abstract: *The national offer of extra-curricular activities started including in the past few years the pop/rock/jazz bands as part of non-formal education, either in institutions like Children's Palace or in private music schools, as a direct consequence of the manifested interest of the students in this direction. The teachers coordinating secondary and highschool level bands are challenged to find ways to keep the students engaged and motivated for longer periods of time. Student's motivation is related to their need of being listened to and to be consulted in regards of the decisions that concern the ensemble they belong to and to their image that this activity is a project-based one and requires time, and in this project they can contribute with abilities from other domains. This article suggests some of the key points that can help a band teacher to maintain a high level of motivation in students for a longer time.*

Key words: *motivation, creativity, band, secondary, high-school*

1. Introduction

The information flies fast and faster and it is accessible to all ages. Information about influencers, TV stars, music icons, about the latest movie releases, the news about the big music publishers, are at anyone's hand, being promoted directly, through online media or social platforms, or through the good old trusted TV and radio stations. It is almost impossible to ignore that, and the informational bombing gets even to those who have no interest in these domains whatsoever.

The children are exposed to stories from the world of musicians, about teenage bands and, step by step, in the heart of those who have even the slightest preference to music playing, the desire of having their own teenage band takes shape. All the opportunities for making new friends, for touring in other cities for shows seem very appealing to them at this point. Some of them look out for music clubs, in co-curricular activities, and others start walking on their own on the road to music, with or without the support of their parents or a teacher.

2. Discussions

But, from the moment that the band took shape and until the first concert, there are many changes and challenges, especially in the way the students perceive their role in working for their dream, and the most difficult task for a teacher is to keep the students motivated, way past the initial energy that lighted up their imagination. Frustration, resilience, the drive even in the absence of obvious results challenge both the teacher and the student, up to the point when the student either quits, or becomes a good musician. It is a gamble, but those who quit because they couldn't stay motivated are no lost: they would have done it sooner or later. Those who are serious about music never take the idea of quitting seriously, if no other

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trauma or objective issues are involved (financial problems, family problems).

In the shows that have as a main subject teenage bands, the problems exposed are usually those about the relationships between the members of the bands, including their families, competitions, self-esteem—all of which are real problems, that serve younger students in developing their relationship and social intelligence, no doubt, but which do not reflect the most important challenges that a band has to face:

- The instrumentalists have an individual role. They can not replace each other, they are not doubled and the absence of one of them compromises the quality of a rehearsal; so it is hard to find the right time to schedule a rehearsal when all of the members are available;
- There is always a member of the band that does not have a real interest in music, and who never practices outside the band room;
- The members of the band have to continue the individual instrumental lessons. There are a lot of self-sufficient members who do not want to progress outside what they have to practice for the band. That limits their learning speed and the future repertoire.

And many other challenges, but these are the ones that affect the way that the band develops. Playing in a band is a continuous exercise of team work, enhances the empathy and the ability to listen to other people's opinions.

A band teacher has the role to moderate and organize all the interventions, then offer opportunity for students to decide on their own which solution fits best. A band can be built around the personalities of the students and the repertoire can be mostly chosen by them. It is a rare thing to find a group of five students that share exactly the same music preferences, hence the mixtures of styles that will be found in the chosen repertoire. It is not a priority to have a clean and determined music genre for a student's band, but it is a priority to make sure that all the members of the band feel listened to and represented in the music they are performing. There are middle-road solutions, and the teacher can mediate that. In the shows about teenage bands, the problem of repertoire is non-existent, because the bands usually have their own original songs. In the real life, that rarely happens. So, in the end, the responsibility of the repertoire falls into the teacher's hands.

Analyzing my own experience, I managed to gather instruments and attitudes that can support a beginner pop/rock/jazz band teacher. I am still working on this list, as my experience grows rich with every new student I have, and I read it often, so I never forget that my main focus is not music, but the student.

Involving students in taking decisions

The more we manage to get the students involved in making decisions that concern the band, the more motivated they are, because the band becomes their personal project. Consulting the students about the repertoire is easy: there are social platforms and groups on which you can all share links and vote, there are even free sites that can host a survey involving their friends also. These voting sessions can be organized to decide which are the future projects: contests, festivals, recordings, school concerts, but also the repertoire, which has proved to be the biggest motivational factor.

The students practice more the songs they like. Of course, the teacher can make a deal with the band: one song chosen by the students, one song chosen from teacher's proposals. It is very important that the teacher never expresses the opinion on the students preferences. These can be shaped, but a disapproval can ruin the trust between students and teacher. It was a surprise for me the growing preference for the '70s-'80s music in the last 3 or 4 years, in very young ages. The reason behind this phenomenon is the use of musical fragments in short sketches on social media (TikTok and others)

The students are motivated to study theme, because they get the attention of the other through these musical quotes ("Rick Rolls" and other jokes). For beginner bands, the students have to be consulted about the band members, about the instruments that they will be assigned to, and that stays also for band members that are poly-instrumentalists. They must be given the chance to exert their abilities in the band. The teacher can guide the process using questions, until the students find their own arguments for supporting a certain decision.

3. Results

Clear objectives, with deadlines and means of being measured

Not all the students wish to play on stage, but all of them wish to be admired, to play well, and to be appreciated by other teachers, colleagues and parents. A clear objective can be presenting five songs in a charity concert, representing the school in a local or national festival, which also implies a short city-break, which is highly motivating, repeating a song until it is good enough to be recorded in a professional studio, and broadcast it on the school's radio/local radio or on social media. Today's students are fascinate about the content and influencers, many of them dreaming about making money from creating content. The number of likes or listeners of a song can be a clear objective, easy to measure and to follow. The students love to know what they are preparing for. Repeating over and over again without a clear purpose becomes at times inefficient, and that is why the teacher has to encourage students to get involved into projects, propose different actions, and give meaning to the whole process. Not only once, but as a constant in their musical path.

A few years ago, I was rehearsing with a vocal-instrumental ensemble. The rehearsals were scheduled on Saturdays and, at the beginning, there were many students who attended the rehearsals, but, week after week, their number grew short, as they lost motivation, up until from the whole ensemble, there were only four students left. Because I identified their need of a clear objective, I promoted the idea of a local choir competition, and asked them if they would like to represent the school. They agreed and, from that moment on, we had productive rehearsals, with 30 students, willing to work extra on their lunch-breaks. The students that play music or sing out of their own passion are rare, but the teacher has the mission to find the means to make them love it, engage them, because only that will lead to real music competence and great memories. Some teachers judge the non-engagement of the students as lack of interest. Most of the times, their attitude is a mirror that stays right in from of us and that shows us that the motivation and the

energy has to come from the teacher first.

Encouraging the creativity of the students

The band belongs to the students and its image has to be the result of their preoccupations. There are many students passionate about video and photo editing, and other visual arts. If there are students in the class or in the band that have these passions, they have to be involved to create the image of the band: video materials with the activity of the band, creating a band logo or finding representative images for the songs or the spirit of the band. The logo can be used in stickers that can be shared to the colleagues, can be used on T-shirts or on any other merchandise.

It is almost unbelievable how much this counts for the students, regardless of their age! The image unity offers the sense of belonging to a group and strengthens the motivation. The musical creativity has a very important role in band's activity. A jazz/pop/rock band is not a musical group that reproduces, using available means, songs that are already in the top of students and parents preferences. It can have different approaches of a known repertoire, or even original songs. There are many students who can easily write lyrics and this special gift can be used in band's activity. Even without having a lyricist in the band, original songs can be made, maybe chosen through a school's contest. This an important way of getting the community involved in band's activity.

I personally had this kind of experiences and they were completed by the professional production of the songs. One of them has been broadcast many times on the local radio station, and the other one got a tropee in a national composition contest. Not all the time these exercises ended up with the results I expected, but they proved to be very important for the future development of some students who tried again and succeeded in writing an original song.

Shaping the creativity of the students who participate in these activities is important in a way in which they also gain a solid freedom of thought, converging in surprising artistic results, as pointed out by Paul G. Woodford⁴¹, in the work "Democracy and Music Education: Liberalism, Ethics, and the Politics of Practice". The author analyses the works of the philosopher John Dewey, observing that his vision is that students are not only receivers of information, but that they are also possible sources of knowledge and expertise, which will eventually lead to hybridization of values.

As a teacher, I lived this phenomenon through the activities of sharing music, learning a lot about high quality good music, and poor artistic acts. For the bands I coordinated, sharing music moments were some of the most important learning opportunities and I watched as time passed how their playlists developed and students' preferences got more and more diverse. On the top of that, I also learned a lot of good music.

Making the rehearsals efficient

Creativity and freedom of thought do not mean chaos. Having a mess in the rehearsal room leads to inefficiency. It must be taken into consideration the fact that the students who register for band lessons do not want only musical knowledge,

⁴¹https://www.researchgate.net/publication/289645142_Democracy_and_Music_Education_Liberalism_ethics_and_the_politics_of_practice, 20.07.2020

but also the social part of the experience. It is very important to programme a short socialization break after a productive sequence of the lesson. The rules, none the less, must be clear and the moments-timed, otherwise it will be very hard to continue the lesson. Although I used posters with rules, the students got enthusiastic about those only when they had a word to say about that. The rules take into consideration general events that happen in certain ages and groups: at young ages (10-12 years) all the students want to sing, to play an instrument they do not know, sharing music, experiment, bully or mock other colleagues, speak loudly...all the ingredients that usually make a rehearsal impossible. The discipline can be maintained, but there is an acute need of including instrument switches, sharing music activities, experiment sessions, while the bullying and mocking other students are strictly forbidden.

The children are willing to get involved and to listen to instruction, if they know that they will get their chance of being listened to. Even when there are open discussions, the teacher will moderate them, in order to balance and cultivate mutual respect between band members, regardless of the musical competence. I have seen great students that tended to feel superior to their colleagues, thus becoming unwanted, or they made jokes that made other students feel uncomfortable. The saddest consequence of this attitude is that a beginner can be intimidated and play only worse. As beginners, most of the students...play badly. But it is a process that must be supported by more experienced band members and understood as one which does not become better or more efficient if the beginner feels stressed out. The rules are not enough. There is also a great need for *active consequences*⁴²: clear sanctions, no negotiations. It depends on the teacher how they moderate, but the pedagogy literature is filled up with examples that grow teachers efficiency or help them take action in conducting the teaching process.⁴³

Celebrating victories

Self-motivation appears usually around the age of 12 years, when the children identify their preferences and start having initiatives. Until then, motivating them is a difficult task, usually accomplished through external motivators. At young ages, the rewards corresponding to their level of understanding work very good. It will always work a reward that consists in a toy or something sweet. However, these kinds of rewards are the way to very unhealthy habits and can damage on a long term self-motivation development and the student-teacher relationship.

A good reward is a *special class*: the first class after a concert, in which the activity has a freedom component, or a small party in the rehearsal room, or a switch of instruments. It seems less motivating than a chocolate, but as long as the teacher never offered eatable rewards, children won't expect that. *The special class* translates the idea of a reward into something immaterial, that contributes to the development of self-motivation. The teacher can also propose a *special day*: going out to a specific restaurant, a cafeteria or a movie. The children are very happy to spend time with their band colleagues, but also to spend some time outside the

⁴² Michael Hammond-, „Cum să fii un părinte bun pentru adolescenți”, trad. Mihaela Negrilă, Ed. Trei, 2012, pg. 52

⁴³ Thomas Gordon-, „Profesorul eficient”, trad. Ioan Sava, Ed. Trei, 2012

school's context with their teacher. It builds up an emotional connection that warms up the teacher-student relationship, and that leads to better communication.

4. Conclusions

Seeing the teacher outside school, students begin to understand that music can be a part of an adult's life. The time spent together outside rehearsals creates a greater group cohesion and student's degree of involvement in the band. This is how the *musical friendships* are developed and I was surprised more than once how long lasting and sincere they can be. Some of my former students met their future husbands or wives in the band room, or kept in touch and played together even after they graduated, becoming capable of managing bands on their own, with all that it takes.

Some students started out as non-gifted musicians, but they either turned up to be great music lovers and a very loyal audience for concerts, or they worked hard, overcame their limits and became known in the local community as good musicians.

A teacher has the moral duty of motivating their students. It is easy to give up, or to label them as lazy when they do not practice, when they don't keep their word. But, as music teachers, we are the first ones that have to promote our art, either coordinating a jazz/pop/rock band or fascinating the students during a general music class.

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