Chapter 30

Building and Maintaining a Successful Orchestra Program

**Supplemental Materials: Understanding Students’ Needs**

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### Expectations for Success

If students believe they can be successful they will work hard to succeed and will be motivated to challenge themselves. Over time, students develop beliefs that certain behaviors will lead to certain outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Let’s look at what happens in two program scenarios:

In orchestra program A, the teacher gives daily assignments for home practice, weekly playing tests based on those assignments, requires a practice log signed by a parent/guardian be turned in each week, speaks often of the benefits of daily practice and how students who practice the most often get selected for all-state orchestra, places posters on the walls of the room about the benefits of practice, and provides families with information about how to create a supportive home practice environment. Consequently, students in orchestra program A develop beliefs that people who practice every day will get an “A” in orchestra, and have the best chance of being selected for the all-state orchestra.

The teacher of orchestra program B has a very different approach. This teacher tells the students on the first day of class that practice cards are not required. There are no specific practice assignments, no individual playing tests. The teacher threatens the class with an individual playing test if the orchestra sounds bad , but after the orchestra plays the piece announces, “you sound great, so you all get an A.” There are no aspirational goals discussed in class, like auditioning for all-state orchestra. These students may develop a belief that they can get an “A” in orchestra without practicing at home, and may not develop beliefs regarding the beneficial outcomes of daily practice.

In both of these programs, the teacher’s outcome expectations are likely to have a huge impact on students’ outcome expectations, and will also influence students’ levels of self-efficacy. Students who believe that they can improve with practice will be more likely to persist and expend the effort needed to learn a difficult piece of music, then students who don’t believe that additional effort or persistence will help them improve. See Chapter 3 for more on this.

As you enter the profession, think about what you can do to help your students develop an expectancy for success. Teach in a way that helps your students learn to feel in control of their success or failure.

### Addressing the Three Needs

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggests there are three needs—competence, relatedness, and autonomy— that are essential for students’ growth, social development, and personal well-being. If students believe that playing a musical instrument helps them address these three needs, they will feel more compelled to continue playing in orchestra.

**Competence**

Participation in music making is an intrinsically motivating activity because it is stimulating and challenging. You can help your students feel competent by providing stimulating learning materials and sequencing learning activities in a way that leads to successful performance outcomes. Periodically remind your students about how much they have learned. For example, reviewing previously learned music (a central component of the Suzuki approach) helps students realize how much they’ve grown as musicians. When you praise your students, give them specific praise (e.g., your bow hold looks great, our F-naturals were very in-tune) rather than general praise (e.g., saying “great” or “awesome” every time students stop playing).

Using a digital portfolio as an assessment tool for documenting student growth over time can foster feelings of competence. Dorfman (2013) researched the use of a digital portfolio with her students. This assessment approach aided her students in goal-setting, gave strong documentation of their progress over time, was very informative for parents of the students, and most importantly, helped her students develop feelings of competence as they witnessed their personal growth over time.

**Relatedness**

Most orchestra programs are structured around the large ensemble. Researchers have found that students in large ensembles form tight-knit communities with positive social interactions. Students develop a sense of connection, community, and belonging. Their participation in ensemble may boost their personal self-esteem, and self-confidence (Abril, 2013; Adderley, Kennedy & Berz, 2003; Evans & Liu, 2019; Volpe et al., 2016). Musicians report having transcendent experiences of “flow” during well-prepared performances (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Social events, trips, and performances help students in your ensemble build strong personal relationships.

**Autonomy**

Some directors of large ensembles earn a reputation for exerting large amounts of external control by offering rewards, making threats, or giving lots of negative competence feedback in rehearsal. According to Ryan & Deci (2000), these types of behaviors can dimmish students’ feelings of autonomy. Large ensemble repertoire may reduce the autonomy of the performer because decisions about tempo, pitches, rhythms, articulations and dynamics are often pre-determined (Hopkins 2019). To foster feelings of autonomy, you should balance your large ensemble rehearsals with opportunities for your students to make music in situations with greater autonomy, such as chamber music, solo playing, and creative music making experiences like improvising and composing (Evans 2015). Autonomy supportive teachers provide students with freedom to make musical choices while also providing a supportive structure (Schnerer & Hopkins, 2021).

### Setting Goals

The way you decide to structure your programs can promote mastery goals, performance goals, or a combination. Mastery goals represent a focus on learning and self-improvement. Students focused on mastery goals value learning for its own sake, how much has been learned, and the quality of their learning (Austin, Renwick, & McPherson, 2006) In contrast to mastery goals, performance goals represent a more general concern with demonstrating ability and trying to do better or not appear worse than others (Ames, 1992).

Midgley et al. (2000) researched mastery and performance goals. Examples of mastery goals include:

* It’s important to me that I thoroughly understand my orchestra music.
* It’s important to me that I improve my skills this year.

In contrast, examples of positive performance goals include:

* It’s important to me that other students in orchestra think I am good at playing my instrument.
* It’s important to me that I play well compared to others in my orchestra.

Negative performance goals include:

* One of my goals is to keep others from thinking that I don’t play well.
* It’s important to me that my teacher doesn’t think that I don’t play as well as other students in the orchestra.

Most people are motivated by a complex mix of mastery and performance goals. It is possible to have a strong desire to practice for self-improvement, while also wanting to practice to win an audition. Researchers have demonstrated that successful students often pursue both mastery goals and performance approach goals in combination (Harackiewicz et al. 2002, p. 640).

If you want to foster a mastery orientation in your classroom you could: 1) make a special effort to recognize students’ individual progress, 2) have individual practice time during rehearsal where students can choose among learning several different scales, etudes, or pieces based on their current level of achievement, 3) give customized practice assignments that are matched to students’ needs and skill level, 4) consider how much individual students have improved when assigning grades.

If you want to foster a performance orientation you could: 1) organize seating based on playing test scores), 2) highlight the work of the highest achieving students and point out students who do well as a model for the other students, 3) help students understand how their performance compares to others, and 4) encourage students to compete with each other and with students from other schools.

Students who balance positive performance goals with mastery goals will experience high levels of success. However, students who are unable to compete with the highest achievers may exclusively adopt negative performance goals, which has consistently been shown in research to lead to maladaptive patterns of learning. For example, if a director puts a lot of emphasis on competing for seating within sections, the students who believe that they have no chance of competing may begin using defensive strategies in order to preserve their self-concept. A commonly used strategy is withholding effort (i.e., not practicing). If a student doesn’t practice, they have a good excuse for not being able to compete. Over time, this lack of practicing will have a detrimental effect on learning, and they may reach a point where they decide to discontinue participation.

Research suggests that an overemphasis on competition vs. cooperation may have a detrimental effect on the students in your program (Austin, 1991; Qin, Johnson, and Johnson, 1995). You can strike a balance between mastery and performance goals by 1) not linking playing tests to seating, 2) having all violin students play both violin 1 and violin 2 parts, 3) rotating seating on each concert, each piece within a concert, or in each rehearsal, 4) emphasizing the importance of teamwork and cooperation when you rehearse.

Your challenge is to establish high expectations for success, help foster feelings of competence, relatedness and autonomy, and structure your program to provide a healthy balance between mastery and performance goals. But most important of all, remember that you need to learn what motivates the *individual* students in your program.

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