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Health Risks Faced by Public School Band Directors

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Public school band directors face many work-related hazards in their grueling, yet rewarding job. As a school year progresses, directors are expected to work long hours, while trying to balance professional and personal responsibilities. A band director whose career spans multiple decades can potentially face a number of serious medical problems. Some members of the profession develop debilitating maladies, or worse, die as a result of career-related health problems.

From 2001-2011, newspapers reported 40 deaths of band directors, as determined by a Lexis Nexus search. The age, gender, years of experience, teaching assignment, and causes of death have been diverse. Data from this investigation indicated trends that are worth examining.

The deceased band directors were divided into the following age groups: 25-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, and 66+ years. The largest number of deaths occurred in the 56-65 age group, in which 16 deaths were reported. Both the 25-35 and 36-45 age groups reported 6 deaths and the 46-55 age group reported 9 deaths. No deaths were reported in the 66+ age group. This could be attributed to the fact that many band directors have retired by that age.

Closely related to the age of these directors was the number of years they served as a band director. Categories for this analysis included 1-10, 11-20, 21-30, 31-40, and 41+ years. Twelve deaths were reported among band directors who had 21-30 years of teaching experience, making it the highest ranking category. There were six deaths in the 31-40 years of experience group and three deaths in each of the remaining categories.

Of the 40 deaths of band directors reported in newspapers, 34 of them were male and 6 were female. This is not surprising, given that there are more men than women working in this profession. High school directors constituted the largest number of deaths (24), which was considerably higher than the number of middle school directors (6), and college/university directors (3).

Causes of death among band directors were diverse; however heart attacks were the most common factor, with 12 deaths. Additionally, there were three deaths from heart disease and three deaths from brain or heart aneurisms, which are all included in the "Heart" category. Seven

deaths were attributed to cancer and there were three suicides. One death was reported in each of the following categories: fatigue, drug overdose, tragic, lupus, and birth complications. An intriguing finding was that eight of these deaths occurred while on duty, most commonly while traveling with students.

Band directors might have additional health problems that are not life-threatening, but could reduce their quality of life. Scheib (2003) performed a case study following four music educators that were experiencing burnout due to workload stress and role conflicts. Hearing loss is a particular risk for band directors. Research has been conducted pertaining to noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL) and how it can influence career band directors. In a study conducted by Cutietta, Klich, Royse, and Rainbolt (1994) on hearing loss among music educators, they stated, “When signs of NIHL were found, the degree of loss was greater among high school band directors than in the other music teacher related groups” (p. 327). They went on to point out that “there seemed to be a relationship between the degree of loss and the age of band directors” (p. 327) and that men appear to be more at risk for NIHL than women. Chesky (2000) added:

The reason for a noise standard is to protect workers from hearing loss that may eventually become handicapping for communication. For musicians, hearing loss can be a detriment not only to communication, but also to their ability to maintain their livelihood. (p. 17)

The overall mental well being of music educators is an additional source of concern. In their study of music teachers, Fjellman-Wiklund, Sundelin, and Brulin (2002) determined that “an important task for music teacher training is to confirm the power of pedagogy and physical and psychosocial work factors for the students, not only to become a good teacher but also to maintain good health” (p. 3). They go on to address issues closely related to the band directing profession, stating:

If there are enough resources, we may perceive the demand as a challenge, which in its turn leads to a positive development--we learn to handle a difficult situation. Should there be a lack of resources to act, i.e., to have too little control, the demands of work are perceived as a threat. One cannot then learn to deal with unexpected situations, which in turn leads to loss of self-confidence and low self-esteem. This creates negative stress and increases the risk of sickness and ill health. (p. 3)

The body of research regarding health-related risks to music educators is limited. Furthermore, few studies have specifically targeted band directors and the numerous stressors associated with their profession. There is a paucity of research regarding how a band director can prevent career-related health symptoms, thus improving their quality of life and allowing them to be an effective and successful educator for several years.

The purpose of this study was to determine health risks associated with being a career band director and possible ways to prevent these health problems. The results of this study will hopefully provide the band director community some research-based information that can help improve their quality and length of life.

Research questions included the following:

- 1) What health problems are associated with the profession of band directing?
- 2) What are the demographics of band directors at greatest risk for premature death?

3) What are some ways band directors can avoid career-related health risks?

Method

To examine health risks faced by band directors, a pilot study of local instrumental educators was conducted. A researcher-designed questionnaire was sent to urban, suburban, and rural secondary band directors in the North Texas area via Survey Monkey. The majority of the participants were members of the Texas Music Educators Association Region II. The return rate of the survey was 31% (requested respondents $N = 348$, actual respondents $N = 108$).

The first survey question, “Do you know a band director who died prematurely or unexpectedly?” was designed based on the data retrieved from the newspaper accounts mentioned previously. If the answer was affirmative, respondents were asked to indicate the age, gender, years taught, and health issue that may have caused the death.

The second part of the survey addressed the respondent’s personal health issues. First, the respondents were asked to indicate what health problems they had from a checklist provided. The options included skin cancer, hypertension, hearing loss/impairment, diabetes, heart disease, shoulder/neck pain, and sleep apnea. Participants were then asked to answer the open-ended response question, “What health issues do you have that could be attributed to teaching band (if any)?”

The third section of the survey solicited solutions to health issues that were job-related. Respondents were asked to provide open-ended responses to the question, “Do you have any suggestions as to how the health problems associated with being a band director can be reduced or eliminated?”

Results

A total of 30.6% of participants indicated that they knew a band director that had died prematurely or unexpectedly. These respondents were then asked to indicate the age, gender, cause of death, and whether or not the director taught middle school or high school. Deaths were most frequently reported in the 46-55 age bracket, with 12 deceased (33.3%). The group with the second highest number of deaths was 36-45 years, with 11 deceased (30.5%). Next was the 56-65 years category with 8 deaths (22.2%), followed by the 25-35 year age bracket with 5 deaths (13.8%). No deaths were recorded for the 66+ age category. The gender category of deceased colleagues indicated that 35 were male (97.2%) and 1 was female (2.8%).

Examination of years of teaching experience of deceased band directors indicated that 45.7% ($n = 16$) had taught for 21+ years. Those who had taught for 11-20 years ($n = 12$) comprised 34.3% of deceased colleagues and 20% ($n = 7$) had 6-10 years of teaching experience. No deaths were reported among band directors in their first five years of teaching.

The category of grade level taught by the deceased band director consisted of three responses—Middle School, High School, or both Middle School and High School. High school band directors had the highest percentage of deaths with 38% ($n = 13$), followed by 32% ($n = 11$) among directors who taught on both middle school and high school campuses. Middle school band directors had the lowest rate of deaths with 29% ($n = 10$).

Causes of death among band director colleagues indicated that heart complications were the primary factor, leading to 51% of band director deaths. The next factor was tragic circumstances,

i.e. suicide, accidental death, and drug overdose, causing a 29% ($n = 9$) mortality rate. Cancer claimed the lives of 12.9% ($n = 4$) of band directors, 9.6% ($n = 3$) died of undetermined causes, 6.5% ($n = 2$) died of a stroke, and 3.2% ($n = 1$) died of diabetes.

When participants were asked to select from a list what personal medical conditions they could attribute to being a band director, the most frequent response (68.7%) was neck and shoulder pain (see Table 1). Almost half (48.4%) of the band directors reported hearing loss and 31% suffered from sleep apnea. Hypertension was reported by 23.4% of directors and 15.6% had skin cancer. Heart disease afflicted 7.8% of respondents and 3.1% suffered from diabetes.

Table 1

Respondents' (N = 64) Health Issues Related to Being a Band Director

| Medical Condition | Number of Respondents | Percentage of Respondents |
|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Neck and Shoulder Pain | 44 | 68.7 |
| Hearing Loss | 31 | 48.4 |
| Sleep Apnea | 20 | 31.2 |
| Hypertension | 15 | 23.4 |
| Skin Cancer | 10 | 15.6 |
| Heart Disease | 5 | 7.8 |
| Diabetes | 2 | 3.1 |

Note. 64 participants provided a total of 64 responses

Participants were then requested to provide open-ended responses regarding personal health issues that could be attributed to teaching band (see Table 2). The most frequent maladies reported included heart disease ($n = 11$), neck/ shoulder/ back pain ($n = 10$), hearing loss ($n = 7$), and stress ($n = 7$). Other work-related issues included anxiety ($n = 6$), obesity ($n = 5$), depression ($n = 5$), ulcer/acid reflux ($n = 4$), skin cancer ($n = 4$), family issues ($n = 4$), exhaustion ($n = 3$), allergies ($n = 3$), alcohol abuse ($n = 2$), and one with vocal problems. One respondent said that they had quit teaching twice in their career to lose weight for health reasons. Another director mentioned his/her cholesterol, blood pressure, and how the time demands of the job made it impossible to eat right and exercise.

Table 2

Respondents' (N = 72) Health Problems Attributed to Teaching Band

| Medical Condition | Number of Respondents | Percentage of Respondents |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Heart Disease | 11 | 15.2 |
| Shoulder, Neck, Back Pain | 10 | 13.8 |
| Stress | 7 | 9.7 |
| Hearing Loss | 7 | 9.7 |
| Anxiety | 6 | 8.3 |
| Obesity | 5 | 6.9 |
| Depression | 5 | 6.9 |
| Skin Cancer | 4 | 5.5 |
| Family Issues | 4 | 5.5 |
| Ulcer/ Acid Reflux | 4 | 5.5 |
| Exhaustion | 3 | 4.1 |
| Allergies | 3 | 4.1 |
| Alcohol Abuse | 2 | 2.7 |
| Vocal Problems | 1 | 1.3 |

Note. 55 participants provided a total of 72 responses

Anxiety and stress were also a frequent concern of band directors. Several directors were concerned about possible hearing loss, particularly the inability to hear pitches at certain frequencies. Skin cancer was a health issue of several high school band directors. One director lost his/her voice frequently and another director revealed that bunions were a painful side effect from standing to direct band all day. Tension in the neck and shoulders was a common complaint, as well as lower back pain. One director attributed his back pain to lifting heavy instruments and equipment. Loss of sleep and a lack of family time were also noted. One director attributed his chronic allergy problems to an unclean band hall. A common ailment was being overweight. Stress and pressure placed on one director by his administration caused him to take Xanax to cope with the job, whereas another director resorted to alcohol.

The third and final question in the survey was “Do you have any suggestions as to how health problems associated with being a band director can be reduced or eliminated?” Participants provided 91 suggestions in response (see Table 3).

One teacher stated that not working from home would play a big role. Another director suggested that band directors eat better and learn how to control stress and delegate responsibilities. Having a hobby was proposed by one teacher, yet he added that it was hard to justify the time involved. One respondent stressed the importance of playing his instrument as much as possible in a relaxed environment. A few directors suggested praying and church involvement. Taking vacations was a way for one director to combat stress issues. One respondent advised that directors limit their activities in the band program. Additional recommendations included schools requiring band directors to use earplugs and eliminating marching band.

One participant suggested that healthy habits need to be established early in a band director's career, including setting limitations on the number of hours spent at work. Echoing this sentiment, a teacher stated that directors need to be willing to cut back their hours and that efforts put forth into having honor band or a state champion marching band would be better spent with their families and having a life outside their programs. Another respondent wrote, "Create a more process (rather than product) oriented Music Education culture." Making rehearsals more efficient so there could be less of them was also a suggestion.

Some participants felt that their hearing would have been greatly improved if the acoustical design of their band halls were improved. Another director maintained, "Administrators need to accommodate directors' conditions' and allow for them, instead of overloading them to the point of breaking." One director offered the following words of advice:

I think most health issues can be attributed to the lifestyle that many band directors live. Long hours, high stress, coupled with an exceptionally high workload will cause problems even for individuals that are already physically fit and healthy. Without a major change in the system of expectations of quality, quantity of performances and competitions, lesson planning, and communication, there is little choice for band directors who want to be successful. That success will only come through with the work and stress that is typical of this profession.

Table 3

Suggestions as to How Health Problems Can be Reduced or Eliminated
 Respondents' (N = 91) (open response)

| Health Solutions | Number of Respondents | Percentage of Respondents |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Better Diet and Exercise | 21 | 23.0 |
| Stress Management | 19 | 20.8 |
| Use Hearing Protection | 11 | 12.0 |
| Adequate Sleep/ Relaxation | 11 | 12.0 |
| Efficient Scheduling | 8 | 8.7 |
| Better Facilities | 5 | 5.4 |
| Delegate Responsibilities | 5 | 5.4 |
| Reduce Marching Band Commitments | 4 | 4.3 |
| Have a Hobby | 3 | 3.2 |
| Perform for Pleasure | 2 | 2.1 |
| Have a Spiritual Life | 2 | 2.1 |

Note. 55 participants provided a total of 91 responses

With regards to job-related medical issues, one respondent stated:

I think band directors need more resources that are particular to our situations concerning the effects of band noise or music on our hearing. There probably needs to be an initiative to make sure that our practice facilities are engineered properly so that students and teachers do not suffer negative effects over time. I would also appreciate some input regarding skin cancer and marching bands. Are we doing everything we can to protect our students and ourselves? Are there specific guidelines or recommendations that could be targeted specifically for marching band?

Another director added:

I believe that our line of work will always be stressful, especially for those of us wanting to be successful in this field. I think that directors should be encouraged to see their physicians on a regular basis (especially for high school directors and the dermatological

consequences of summer band) and be educated on potential stress-related health risks. I also believe that directors need to take care of themselves emotionally/socially - finding a balance between work and their family, marriage, church/religious beliefs, etc. Hearing from successful directors who have a healthy marriage, a happy family, and a "normal" life outside of work is crucial to our colleagues keeping everything in perspective.

Further, a director offered this advice to his colleagues: "Eat right: I bet band directors buy fast food more than any group in education. Try to exercise some (I did mine at 5:00 am). When you leave the band hall LEAVE your work there. It will be there tomorrow."

Discussion

There are many items to note about the findings of this study. In reviewing the results of the first research question, there were few directors who had a deceased colleague. With only roughly 30% of respondents knowing a colleague that died, it becomes clear that dying on the job is not a mainstream event. This is encouraging for the band director profession. In regards to the age groups of the deceased colleagues, the most common mortality age group was 46-55. The second highest death rate occurred in the 36-45 year age group. It would have been likely to assume the most deaths would be materializing in the older age group categories. These results contrast with the newspaper article research, as the overall death group age was higher.

In the current study there was a considerably higher rate of male band director deaths than female band director deaths, which is logical since there are more men in the profession than women. Unfortunately, we will not be able to know the cause of death for the women band directors due to the structure of the survey. What is interesting to note is that there was only one female band director that died on the job. These findings are congruent with the newspaper research.

Results showed that there were no deaths in the first five years of teaching reported. The results of the study documented an informal trend that those with more years teaching also had an increase documentation of dying mid-career. However, in analyzing the structure of the question it may have been more effectively written if the categories covered 10 years instead of 5 years and if all of the band directors who taught 21+ years were not combined. The findings in this category are in line with what was documented in the newspaper search.

When teaching level demographics of deceased band directors were analyzed, it trended toward high school directors perishing most frequently, followed by the directors who taught both middle and high school. Even still, directors who were reported as being high school teachers had a higher frequency of death than middle school directors. Many of the factors involved in this could be schedule, workload, administrative responsibilities, and high profile performances. Enhancements could be made to this question by adding college and university directors into the research. Many professors are former middle and high school band directors, and they may deal with similar battles. The newspaper data align with the findings that high school directors are more at risk of premature death.

In the last question that focused on deceased band directors, a prevailing cause of death seems to emerge in both the newspaper research and the results of the study—heart issues, accounted for the largest proportion of recorded deaths. The checklist of categories contained in the survey may have been somewhat vague and limiting. There were higher numbers of tragic

circumstance deaths than anticipated, and undetermined causes were the third leading cause of death.

The results of the survey allowed for first-hand opinions from band directors on what health issues they attributed to band directing. Shoulder and neck pain dominated the response rate of the band directors. Long hours of conducting and standing no doubt contributed to this finding. Hearing was also major factor in the band directors' health with nearly half of the respondents suffering at some level from this ailment. This is in keeping with research by Chesky, Cutietta, Henoeh, Klich, Rainbolt, and Royse (2000). The survey checklist had hypertension and heart disease separate, however, in retrospect they probably should have been combined into one category as they both pertain to heart health. Hypertension was reported among about one-quarter of band directors and some complained of heart disease in various forms. Back pain could have also been added to the neck and shoulder pain category. This may have solicited a higher response rate, as many band directors suffer from these similar types of pain. Skin cancer was a disease that was reported by a group of the responding band directors. Many directors spend several hours outside in the sun during the summer months preparing for marching season. It is possible that these outdoor working conditions may contribute to these diagnoses. Diabetes did not play a substantial role in the percentages.

The open-ended questions allowed for a glimpse into the morale and working conditions that are unfortunate for these band directors. Providing a free-response format for listing ailments resulted in directors naming numerous medical conditions. Heart disease was a large factor in the health of band directors. Shoulder/neck/back pain was also a major infirmity, while hearing loss and stress was of milder concern.

Reviewing the band directors' descriptions of their health complaints provided a confidential sounding board for the band directors. One director admitted to using Xanax to deal with his school administration's unrealistic expectations. Another director felt he needed to get healthier and quit teaching because he sincerely felt the band director lifestyle was the opposite of a healthy lifestyle. With all of the information gathered thus far, we begin to understand how there are conditions and expectations that can cause band directors' health to deteriorate over the course of their careers.

Several band directors provided possible solutions to health problems in elaborate detail. Justification for including many of their quotes in the study was to help the reader gain insight into their thoughts, feeling, and health. Some of these directors sounded energetic and some sounded dejected. When their quotes were analyzed for use in the data chart, better diet and exercise and stress management were the two suggestions that were mentioned the most frequently. For many band directors, that suggestion is difficult to implement, due to many school-related activities they are required to attend. Most of the suggestions mentioned in the study require implementation by the individual band director. Relying on a school to upgrade facilities or reduce marching band commitments may be unrealistic. The responses suggesting learning relaxation techniques, practicing efficient scheduling, acquiring a hobby, playing music for pleasure, and developing spirituality may be more practical recommendations to aid individual band directors in enhancing their quality of life.

Because this was designed as a pilot study, both the number of survey participants and the geographic area were limited. To acquire more valid data, this study needs to be distributed to a larger population of band directors both within Texas, as well as other states in the US. Additionally, this pilot study revealed several weaknesses in the survey instrument, which were identified in the discussion section. Prior to distributing the survey for a comprehensive study, the suggested alterations should be made.

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