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Experiences and Perceptions of Middle School Handbell Participants

Debbie Rohwer

University of North Texas, debbie.rohwer@unt.edu

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to describe the process of music learning and the perceptions of members in a school-based middle school handbell setting. The participants were 39 students and one music teacher in a middle school in Texas. The design of the current study was a case study using observation and interview data. The results highlight a successful middle school handbell ensemble setting that could be used as a model for a different form of music learning environment than the traditional options generally found in the schools. The study describes the practices and perceptions of a handbell choir situated in the public schools, including themes of (a) instructional processes, (b) music reading, (c) repertoire selection, (d) reasons for participating, and (e) future handbell participation. Conclusions address pragmatic issues for practitioners to consider in the implementation of a school-based handbell ensemble.

Introduction

Handbell choirs are common music ensembles found in churches around the United States. While Westcott acknowledged the setting of churches as the most common venue for handbells, he stated “its real significance lies in its recognized value as an educational aid for the young. Perhaps greater use might be made of handbells in the school rather than the church setting” (1962, p. 115).

Pedagogy articles have advocated handbells as a useful instructional tool for a variety of age and experience levels and in many types of settings. Bunting (1980) and Faris (1978) stated that handbells can serve as valuable music learning tools for preschool students all the way to senior citizens, and can also be useful for instruction with special needs populations. Bunting added, “at the junior high level, handbells can be considered the near-perfect instrument” (1980, p. 49); handbells are always in tune (Faris, 1978), and sound good, even at the beginning of instruction (Bunting, 1980; Faris, 1978; Higgs, 1973; Westcott, 1962). Authors have also cited the non-musical benefits of handbell participation, such as social engagement and self-discipline (Durrick, 1994; Faris, 1978; Tyler, 1968).

Pedagogues have cited challenges with starting handbell choirs, such as cost (Faris, 1978; Perlmutter, 2012), and, at least in the early years, a lack of music (Westcott, 1962), although by 1978, Faris stated that this was no longer a major concern, and in 2012, Perlmutter documented an abundance of quality music. Faris (1978) indicated what is probably a major issue even several decades later—that

being the lack of handbell pedagogy experience of teachers “since few teacher-training institutions offer handbell experiences to their students, music educators often find it difficult to get a program started” (p. 50).

While there are many older pedagogical articles that have highlighted the musical and non-musical benefits and challenges associated with participating in and starting a handbell choir, there are few systematic investigations of handbell choirs in the research literature. Durrick (1994) completed a handbell pedagogy project with older adults, noting informal evidence of well-being improvement by the participants. Rybak (1995) investigated the use of handbells in older adults’ music experiences, finding that those with less developed musical skills may have a more difficult time achieving flow. Guebert (2014) described the extended techniques used by composers in contemporary handbell choir music.

Most recently, Thornton (2015) surveyed a convenience sample of 86 adult handbell festival participants, finding that most were female, between 45 and 64 years of age, were active handbell members in their churches, and had participated in school music ensembles in their youth. The majority of participants had learned to play handbells in church, with very few learning about handbells in schools. As in Rohwer’s (2010) study of church choir members, common participation motivations were musical, social, and spiritual.

There is a need for a current research study describing the use of handbell choirs with students in school settings. Since there are few handbell programs in the schools (Thornton, 2015), it could be useful to have a model for how handbell pedagogy could function as a school ensemble experience. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to describe the process of music learning and the perceptions of members in a school-based middle school handbell setting.

Method

The design of the current study was a single case study that represented one middle school handbell choir program as a bounded, contextual system; the focus of the case was specific to the exploration of the uniqueness of a handbell choir in the public schools (Yin, 2014). In order to get depth on the context of this one case as an unusual, important example of a specific type of setting, an intrinsic case model was chosen (Stake, 1995).

The study’s procedures were approved by the district’s research review office and the university’s institutional review board. As the researcher, I served as both a participant observer and non-participant observer for the 26 total rehearsals that I attended across the 10 weeks of the study (Creswell, 2014). In the setting, I recorded naturally occurring data sources and logged field notes for later use. I also

watched one of the performances of the group and completed one-on-one interviews with the participants, starting in the eighth week of the study.

Informal interviews and email correspondences with the director spanned the 10 weeks of the study; the single formal interview with the director lasted for 54 minutes, and occurred after all other data sources had been gathered, in order to clarify observation and student interview content. The interviews with the students ranged in length from 6 to 14 minutes ($M = 9.52$, $SD = 2.06$). A general interview guide was developed to use with the students so that consistent topic areas could be covered across all the interviews (Froehlich & Frierson-Campbell, 2013), although follow-up questions varied across the participants. The interview prompts included five demographic questions and seven content questions (see Table 1 for the specific questions). The content of the interview questions was generated after the first 8 weeks of observations, so as to be authentic and valid to the context of the setting. The researcher transcribed all interviews.

Table 1

Student Interview Guide

Demographic prompts:

Gender

Grade

How many years have you played in this handbell choir?

What other elective do you have in school right now?

Do you play an instrument, such as piano, at home or in the community, and if so what instrument and where?

General start-up content prompts:

Was it hard to learn music reading, and why or why not?

What handbell pieces do you like the most and the least and why?

What do you like best and least about being in handbells?

What is hardest about handbells?

What do you think you have learned from being in handbell choir?

Why did you join handbell choir?

What elective will you take next year, and what do you think about playing handbells sometime in the future?

The setting for the study was a purposefully sampled middle school that included handbells as a class experience during the school day. The participants ($N = 40$) in the current study were students ($n = 39$) and one music teacher in a middle school in Texas. The middle school participants were a census of the students registered for one of the two periods of handbells in the middle school that was purposefully selected for having handbell classes during the school day. Of the 39 students that were observed in the handbell choir setting, 29 also consented to be interviewed about their perceptions related to their experiences in handbell choir.

The students were male ($n = 17$) and female ($n = 22$) students in sixth ($n = 23$) seventh ($n = 12$), and eighth ($n = 4$) grades and had been in a handbell choir for 1 to 3 years ($M = 1.35$, $SD = .55$). Approximately half of the students (55%) had a second music elective in addition to handbells. None of the students had a piano background or were currently playing handbells in a church or community organization. The overall school population from which the students came had 877 students in grades six through eight and ethnicity demographics were 46% Caucasian, 41% Hispanic, 9% African American, and 4% other across the school. Fifty-eight percent of the students were considered economically disadvantages, 37% were at-risk, and 18% had limited English proficiency.

The director had been a music teacher at the middle school for 23 years and directed the band and handbells at the school. In addition, the director was a handbell director at an area church. As she stated,

I had no handbell experience until the church got them in the mid 90s and I started ringing. After that, a year or two into it I became one of the handbell directors at church and then the handbell director and so I thought I should get some more information and so I went to the national directors' conference in St Louis and took all these classes and did all this ringing and learned so much and made all these fantastic contacts.

The bells used at the school were loaned from the area church and traveled with the director back and forth to the school and church for rehearsals at each venue. The handbell ensemble at the school started as an advisory class in 2007, then in 2009 became an official class. In 2014, the school added a second period of handbells to the daily school schedule.

The data for the current study were analyzed by investigating the convergence of all data sources through memoing and open coding techniques that led to broad, emerging themes; these themes were narrowed and refined through a constant comparative method that engaged selective coding processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The director member checked her transcript and served as an embedded auditor confirming the validity of the overall themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interview questions were reviewed by a panel of three experts and field tested for clarity with two church handbell directors. An external reviewer audited the field notes and interview transcripts, and confirmed the authenticity of the coding of data sources into themes.

In presenting the results of the study, frequency counts were used to document the extent of response uniformity, and quotations served to highlight the context of the themes. It should be noted that for the interview frequency counts, totals may be higher than the number of participants if the students provided an answer that addressed more than one category.

Results

This case study was limited to one handbell organization in one school with one teacher and so generalizations should not be made to other settings or circumstances. As an in-depth study of one setting, though, this study can serve as a first, contextualized step that may lead to further studies that investigate handbell pedagogy across a variety of settings in order to produce generalizable findings.

Based on the contextual observations and interview data, the following themes emerged: (a) instructional processes, (b) music reading, (c) repertoire selection, (d) reasons for participating, and (e) future handbell participation.

Instructional Processes

The following instructional processes were noted based on observation of the handbell choir setting. Because the daily 45-minute handbell classes met in the school cafeteria, the equipment needed to be moved each day, both to and from the ensemble room. The students rolled carts with the bells and carried table pads, gloves, and music binders to the rehearsal venue. The students then set up the tables and handbells at the beginning of the first handbell class of the day and they tore down the tables and handbells at the conclusion of the second class. At the end of the day on Wednesday and Friday, the handbells were placed in the director's car to be transported to the area church from which the bells were loaned. The director took this process of sharing and transporting very seriously and carefully.

The setup process did not detract from the rehearsal time substantially; the students were skilled and efficient at the setup/teardown, with the whole process taking less than five minutes. The only distraction each day was the sound of a floor

cleaner that accompanied the group during the first half of class each day until the cafeteria cleaning was complete.

In the rehearsals, the director commonly moved about the room to help those in need. Sometimes, when there were absences, the director picked up bells and rang with the ensemble. As she stated,

It can be frustrating when kids are absent. I jump in because it is fun. Sometimes the attendance is better in the schools than it is in community and church groups. I have an ideal situation in having a row of bells and a row of chimes so someone can come up, but on the field trip we had one [student] who failed [another class and wasn't eligible to go on the trip] and was on chimes and one was absent on the same note on bells. I was going to jump in, but one of the students read the part and did a fine job.

In terms of instructional choices, the director tended to rehearse a mixture of known and new music. She also balanced detail work with ringing larger sections of works or whole pieces. In the initial stages of learning a piece, techniques were rehearsed separately, either through practice sheets or play-by-ear techniques.

Music Reading

The director stated her desire that the students be musically literate and so the early stages of learning addressed note reading strategies; in this way, the students did not need to write in L for left or R for right or note names or highlight their parts. The director stated:

I've written some exercises that have just one space and one line and the space is your left hand and the line is your right hand and then we relate that to music. The bottom and top of the staff are easy to see. If someone has a visual issue I try to put them in one of those spots to help.

The handbell director described the earliest stages of music instruction in the following way:

In the very early stages our goal was getting the ringing stroke and the damping techniques, which we did without a speck of paper. I called on the kids who were experienced to be my helpers so they wouldn't be bored. It started with imaginary bicycles. Turn it upside down. Pedal. Now pedal backwards. We'd do I play/you play echoes and get them to ring precisely together and then I'd have them move about three positions away so that they would have the experience of ringing all sizes of bells and chimes and we did the ringing and damping with one hand or the other and then added the ringing with the second hand at the precise moment when the other note was to be damped.

Some students perceived the initial learning of music reading to be fairly easy ($n = 16$). As one student described:

It's easy to learn your notes and then you just pay attention to the teacher and you watch how she moves her hands and how fast the tempo is and you do it. I'd never read music before, so I feel most comfortable sticking to my same two notes so that I can concentrate on everything else that is new.

Another student added:

Note reading is pretty easy other than in the very beginning of playing a brand new, hard song. I do air bells to practice when I am first starting a piece. I'm at the top of the staff so it is easier to read.

Other students documented some difficulty with music reading, especially in the beginning stages of learning ($n = 13$).

At first I hated reading the music. It was so hard and then I moved my position and I could see the notes easier there so it was ok. Since then I've pretty much stayed on those notes or the spot to the right.

Another student added:

Reading music is hard because your eyes need to move really quickly and there are so many notes on the page. It helped a bit that I had choir, but it is still hard to read the handbell music sometimes.

Repertoire Selection

In the first stage of learning, the groups practiced easier music. As the director stated, "The music we learn is graded. The lowest grade music has no extra techniques, and it is in 3/4 or 4/4 with no key changes. We start there and then transition into the harder music." More advanced techniques were addressed sequentially through instructional strategies and music choices as indicated by the director:

We transition into the use of three bells. I try to introduce technique development in steps. I sequence the skills regardless of whether we will be using the skill in our current pieces. Some of the students may be with me a year and then they might go ring somewhere else and if they know basic skills then they can join someone else's group. I want them to be able to walk into a church or community group and say "Yes, I can ring."

When discussing the music they play, the students stated that the pieces they liked the most were the new music ($n = 13$) and the music that sounded the best ($n = 10$), with specific musical components that they liked being fast music ($n = 4$), music that had an interesting or important part for their bells ($n = 4$), and music that

represented a mood to the students ($n = 2$). Some students qualified that they started disliking a piece when they had played it too long ($n = 8$), while others stated that they liked music at all stages of learning ($n = 7$). The spread of opinions on this topic can be seen in the following student comments: "I like to learn new pieces. After we perform a piece once I am ready for something new," and in contrast, "I still like older pieces. I like them all. It takes me awhile to learn to like a piece. It's hard in the beginning."

The director addressed the liturgical versus secular nature of handbell music in the public schools in the following way:

When performing English Country Dance, I also say "you might know this as the hymn, All Things Bright and Beautiful," and to me that is an historical statement of fact. *Tunes That Teach* is a good reproducible resource for music. The author gives multiple titles for each song. I don't choose anything with Jesus, God, or Mohammed in the title. I try to choose very carefully. We're seeing more and more things with an alternate title so that folks could use it in different settings.

Reasons for Participating

Students felt that the best thing about being in handbells was the sound ($n = 11$), followed by performing ($n = 9$), going on field trips ($n = 7$), and playing music with friends ($n = 4$). As one student stated, "I like listening to the handbell music once we are all playing together. It is really satisfying when we get it all right. It just sounds so fantastic." Another student added, "I like playing music on the handbells and I like the performances, especially when we can get out of school."

The students documented the hardest thing about handbells was nothing ($n = 16$) followed by music reading/techniques ($n = 8$), first learning a piece ($n = 4$), and switching bells and mallets ($n = 3$). As one student stated,

I am learning more about how to hold the handbells correctly. I can't spill the liquid,ⁱ which is hard for me so the teacher would take a video of me right then and show it back to me and I'd be like "oops."

Another student added:

It is hard when we are just starting a piece because it is so easy for me but everyone else is always slowing down. I just want to ring in peace and the teacher has to stop us a bunch of times to get this same part over and over and I'm just sitting there saying "can we go on now?"

When asked what the most important thing they had learned from being in handbell choir, the most common student response was specific music skills ($n = 14$), followed by ringing exactly together as a group effort ($n = 9$), trying hard ($n =$

3), paying attention ($n = 2$), and having fun ($n = 2$). As one student stated, “It is important to pay attention to your stuff and if someone else messes up don’t let that mess you up and don’t point it out just let them fix it so they don’t get embarrassed and get hurt,” and another added, “I think it’s important to work together to get your arms the same motion as your neighbor’s. It’s easier to do that when you count the beat in your head and then it’s fun.”

Students said that they joined the handbell choir because they had seen the recruitment tour ($n = 9$), they wanted to try something new ($n = 8$), they had friends or siblings that had been in the group ($n = 8$), they liked music in general ($n = 7$), they liked the sound of handbells in specific ($n = 6$), and it was an affordable elective ($n = 3$), as in the following student statement: “My family couldn’t pay for some of the other electives. I chose handbells partly because it was only \$20 and that was for the t-shirt that we wear.”

Future Handbell Participation

In terms of the future, students responded that they would consider finding a handbell group in their high school years or when they are out of school ($n = 13$), or they would definitely want to find a handbell group after graduating from middle school ($n = 8$), with the most common venue being finding a church handbell choir ($n = 6$). Some students stated that they were only doing handbells for the current year ($n = 8$). As one student added, “This is a one-year thing for me. I’m trying out choir next year. I’m not really sure about the future beyond that but if I ever had the opportunity again, I’d play.” Another student stated: “I’m definitely going to join a church handbell group in the future. I want to be a handbell teacher when I grow up.” Yet another student added:

I really want to stay in next year, but what I want to do is band, jazz band, theater, and handbells and there are only two electives for seventh graders. I really want to add jazz band but you can’t do jazz band without being in band and I have a friend in jazz band. I like all of it but I can’t do all of it.

Conclusions

While pedagogical articles have highlighted the benefits and challenges that may occur from handbell participation (Bunting, 1980; Faris, 1978; Higgs, 1973; Tyler, 1968; Westcott, 1962), and studies have provided descriptions of handbell techniques (Guebert, 2014), and the use of handbells with adult handbell festival participants (Thornton, 2015), and older adults (Durrick, 1994; Rybak, 1995), the current study provided context as to how the handbell experience worked as an ensemble during the school day in one middle school setting. Specifically, the current study documented the pedagogical practices of a handbell choir in a public

school setting, and described the perceptions of handbell participants and the teacher/director in the school.

Since this school had two handbell choirs that each met 45 minutes per day and had access to a set of handbells and chimes and music that they did not have to purchase, this scenario may be seen as ideal. The compromise that this setting's participants had to deal with was carting the equipment back and forth and using the cafeteria as a rehearsal space. This compromise may have had some positive side effects, though. The students learned responsibility and care of the equipment by having to transport it and set it up and tear it down each day. In addition, the acoustics and extra distractions in the cafeteria may have made the students more attuned to the director in order to concentrate and learn in this less-than-ideal location.

In terms of acquiring handbells, the current study's process of borrowing handbells from a local church during the weekdays worked well but may be challenging to other settings where the handbell teacher and the handbell director at the church are not the same person. If a school has to purchase handbells, tables, pads, gloves, and music, it can be a large initial financial investment. Chime loaner programs affiliated with many area organizations of Handbell Musicians of America may provide a viable way for programs to obtain a temporary set of handbells while they purchase the other associated equipment needed to begin a school handbell choir. In addition, the facility resource investment of storage and rehearsal space would need to be considered. If a school has the ability to borrow or purchase a set of handbells and/or chimes, though, this learning opportunity may be seen as especially beneficial by low-income parents where renting a trombone or viola may not be financially feasible.

In addition to the equipment challenge, as Faris (1978) documented, it may be hard to acquire an experienced teacher of bells since handbell pedagogy isn't commonly taught in music education programs. The current study's director became highly involved in handbells, initially through the church and subsequently through self-motivated learning experiences. Without the director's passion and knowledge of handbell pedagogy, the musical experience in the current study's setting may not have been nearly as successful.

Undergraduate music education programs may benefit from instructing students about handbell pedagogy. Especially for choral/elementary college students, learning handbells may help them if they apply for a music minister position or if they become elementary music teachers who might have an after-school handbell choir. For those teachers who are already in the schools as music educators, continuing education and professional development programs or graduate degree programs that offer pedagogy of handbells may provide a valuable added service for these practitioners.

The music learning processes that occurred in the current study's handbell classes were similar to practices that occur in other ensembles that might be seen in a public school setting. There were sequenced steps that the director used to help the students learn how to read notation and ring the handbells and chimes. Seeing the teacher move around the room to assist, balancing detail work with a gestalt performance of the whole piece, sequencing instruction on difficult introductory concepts, playing by ear, and practicing motor skill memory were all techniques used in handbells that might also be seen in band or orchestra. Since there is some pedagogical overlap across school music ensembles, then, it may be feasible for a music teacher who wants to learn handbell techniques to feel competent on the educative side of instructing a handbell choir fairly quickly.

A majority of the students perceived the initial stages of learning to read music to be relatively easy, but it should be noted that not all students felt comfort in music reading, even with only the two notes that they started with. It would be beneficial to have additional techniques that can be developed and acquired to ease the transition into note reading for any music ensemble setting, but most importantly, specific to the notationally dense music that handbell ringers have to read.

As documented in past literature, handbells may be an easier entry point to music than other music ensembles for some students, since the note reading can be initially limited to fewer notes and sound production may be quicker to learn than with a band instrument (Bunting, 1980; Faris, 1978; Higgs, 1973; Westcott, 1962). Indeed, as Bunting (1980) described, handbells may be especially suited to the middle school age level where the students may be starting instrumental music without extensive musical backgrounds and may need a place to begin, where the instrument is in tune and sounds good quickly.

The students described positive benefits from participating in handbells, including learning music reading, appreciating the sound of bells, and enjoying the performance experience with others. In addition, students perceived some global benefits from participation, including working hard together and paying attention as a team, which align with the non-musical benefits cited in the literature as social engagement and self-discipline (Durrick, 1994; Faris, 1978; Tyler, 1968).

There was a dichotomy of student opinions in terms of music preference ideas; some students liked newer pieces and others liked all pieces, regardless of newer or older status. The rate of music turnover may be a challenging balance for directors due to the variety of student skill levels in a given group, as well as the schedule demands of concerts and contests. Nonetheless, weighing when to introduce new pieces into the rehearsal schedule for a group may be an important part of student preference in a middle school handbell ensemble, specifically. Also, having access to multiple secular pieces or sacred-based pieces with non-liturgical names may make it easier to present new music in a secular setting like a school.

For those students in the present study who were not continuing with handbells the following year, their choice often was not related to a lack of enjoyment of playing. The students may have been torn by too many interesting choices, so it should be noted that handbells may provide but one option of many that may be perceived to be rewarding to middle school students. The basic exposure to handbells, though, may whet students' appetites for later musical engagement as an adult, specific to handbell choirs in the community or church or possibly other music ensembles in the community.

In terms of the choice of joining handbells, most students noted the recruitment tour as one of the reasons that they decided to join. Playing the handbells for students during a recruitment tour may be a useful way to expose students to an instrument that they may never have seen or heard before. Since the most common additional responses for joining a handbell choir were knowing others and the sound of the handbell choir, it seems like a recruitment tour may cover multiple possibilities.

In conclusion, the middle school handbell ensemble that was described in the current study can serve as a model for a successful music ensemble experience implemented as an elective option for students in the public schools. Future research that can investigate in-school music classes beyond the traditional ensembles of band, choir, and orchestra may allow music educators to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the available options, thereby giving educators the opportunity to choose the appropriate, contextual music experiences that may be most engaging and rewarding for the students in their settings.

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About the Author

Debbie Rohwer is Professor and Chair of Music Education at the University of North Texas, where she has taught for 18 years. Prior to her position at UNT, Debbie

taught middle school band in Illinois. Her degrees are from Northwestern University, the Eastman School of Music, and Ohio State University. Dr. Rohwer directs and facilitates the Denton New Horizons Senior Citizen Band, which she initially organized in 1998, and she serves as the lead editor of the NAFME research journal, *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*. Her research has been published extensively in national and international journals and books.

ⁱ “Not spilling the liquid” is a cup analogy used in handbell pedagogy to describe the need to hold the bells upright.