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University Undergraduate Level - 1st Place**

**Conducting High School Wind Bands: Striking a Balance
between Performance and Education**

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Introduction

Large instrumental ensembles form the core for many Eastern Canadian secondary schools' music programs, making ensemble leadership an essential element of many educators' professional practice. Often, music teachers are expected to achieve high performance standards, such as instrument proficiency and musical expression, while also meeting curriculum outcomes. A successful music educator must balance these dual responsibilities in their approach to ensemble instruction.

The dual role of the music educator-conductor has been discussed by leading researchers in music education. Within the context of ensemble leadership, Dylan Maddix (2023) poses "servant leadership" as a promising model for ensemble directors, where members' mental and physical well-being is prioritized equally with their musical development. Jackie Wiggins (2014) explores social constructivism in ensemble leadership, encouraging music educators to present "music learning experiences as problem-solving experiences" (54). Geoffrey Neuman (2021) and Luis Z. Gonzalez (2001) take a slightly different approach, exploring conducting effectiveness within rehearsal spaces. These examples discuss the philosophical and practical approaches independently, creating a disconnect between the literature's recommendations and educators' everyday praxis. Therefore, I examined how teachers synthesize these aspects in their pedagogical approaches to ensemble instruction, aiming for high-performance standards while helping students develop musical understanding.

In this paper, I investigate four Nova Scotia and New Brunswick secondary wind band educators' approach to meeting performance and educational goals in the classroom. My goal is to identify effective rehearsal strategies, methods of balancing conducting and teacher

responsibilities, and developmentally appropriate outcomes for students to inform teaching at the secondary level.

Literature Review

I have organized the literature review into two main sections, focusing on educators' philosophies and practices respectively. Each section identifies and discusses key themes associated with each aspect of music teaching.

Educator's Philosophies

An educator's philosophy is beliefs teachers have about their identities, classroom roles, and what constitutes important knowledge (i.e., are conceptual concepts or performance abilities more important for students' development). For philosophies, key themes included "conductor" vs. "educator" identities, leadership models, and "product" vs. "process" in the music classroom.

Discussions of conflicting "conductor" and "educator" identities in music educators' practice are ongoing in music scholarship (Morrison and Demorest 2012; Forrester 2018; Jones 2021; Maddix 2023). Scholars have criticized the traditional conductor's characteristics (i.e., characteristics of dominance, discipline, and authoritarian leadership styles) manifesting in educators' pedagogy (Allsup and Benedict 2008; Morrison and Demorest 2012; Maddix 2023). These traits are reflected in Atlantic provinces' musical history, as early music programs were often directed by active or retired bandsmen and adopted practices from regimental musicians (Green and Vogan 1991, 392–97). Morrison and Demorest (2012) argue that an authoritarian podium approach to rehearsal does not support learners in becoming independent musicians (834). However, Bernard (2005) and Dolloff's (2007) discussion of the division between her

“musician” and “educator” identities suggest aspects of the “traditional” conductor may still serve educators, particularly in rehearsal contexts for educators attempting to reach a high-performance standard.

Another decision inherent in ensemble teaching and leadership is whether the director chooses to prioritize performance standards or students’ social development. For example, a director valuing performance goals would emphasize musical precision and technical fluency, whereas one focused on students’ social development prioritizes collaboration and may incorporate more student-centered approaches. In general, literature before 2000 tends to focus on how educators’ leadership can cultivate musical excellence (Battisti 1999). Modern discussions on educators’ leadership style prioritizes musical and social development in young musicians (Maddix 2023). Maddix (2023) encourages the philosophy of “servant-leadership,” popularized by Robert K. Greenleaf. This model encourages a student-centered approach, with a focus on developing students as musicians and empowered members of society.

Finally, scholars discuss whether music educators’ philosophy should focus on “process” v.s. “product,” referring to whether educators should focus on the musical learning process or the musical product students can produce (such as a performance). Lautzenhesier (2000), Wasiak (2013) and Wiggins (2014) each recommend prioritizing both product and process elements in music classrooms to provide authentic assessments for students. However, Taylor’s (2024) examination of band directors found educators’ often used performance as a summative evaluation for students, building programs around festival or other competition seasons. The emphasis on product may suggest a disconnect between the literature’s recommended practice and wind band teachers’ teaching.

Educator's Practice

In the area of teaching practice, key themes included rehearsal approaches, rehearsal strategies, and conducting techniques. Several writers discuss "...a distinct difference in the approach to 'rehearsing' only and 'rehearsing and teaching'" (Miles 2010, 81). Misenhelter (2000), Wasiak (2013), and Tan (2017) also mention this difference between rehearsing and teaching, with minimal elaboration on their distinction. Tan's (2017) literature review of conceptual teaching in instrumental classrooms revealed that an educator may spend under 10% of class time teaching concepts. His review of literature suggests further examination into teachers' perceptions of differences and challenges between lesson and rehearsal structures is needed.

Effective rehearsals are essential for ensembles to reach high-performance standards (Kohut 1973; Battisti 1999; Gonzalez 2001; Jorgensen 2008; Colwell and Hewitt 2011; Wasiak 2013; Wiggins 2014; Barry and Henry 2014–2015; Neuman 2021). Several authors offer promising guidance on rehearsal strategies to achieve high performance standards (Kohut 1973; Battisti 1999; Gonzalez 2001; Neuman 2021). However, Misenhelter (2000), Wasiak (2013), and Wiggins (2014) critique the use of performance-based strategies in educational contexts, as it may potentially limit conceptual teaching moments and hamper students' learning. Wiggins (2014) suggests incorporating more student-centered learning models and social-constructivist approaches from the podium: "To teach from a social constructivist perspective, a teacher needs to know how to plan music learning experiences as problem-solving experiences" (54). She suggests the teacher should provide students with resources to identify and solve musical problems on their own.

Scholars have also discussed the importance of effective conducting gesture in educational instrumental ensembles (Battisti 1999; Lautzenhesier 2000; Worthy 2003; Ulrich 2009; Corporon 2010; Morrison and Demorest 2012; Barry and Henry 2014–2015; Forrester 2018; Jones 2021; Neuman 2021; Maddix 2023; Panetta 2024). Neuman (2021) highlights the importance of educators’ physical conducting skills, stating that a well-prepared conductor can convey musical information more effectively through their gesture than they can through instructional language. However, Price (2006) and Jones (2021) both critique the effectiveness of conducting in educational contexts. Price’s (2006) study found no correlation between a directors’ conducting skill and their ensembles’ performance, while Jones’ (2021) study revealed some educators’ skepticism around conducting as a helpful teaching technique.

Methodology

I used a modified multiple case study methodology (Creswell 2007) to investigate the four wind ensemble teachers that participated in the study. Participants were recruited and chosen based on purposive sampling, with the criteria that they have more than five years of teaching experience. The table below provides a brief description of the participants.

Table 1: Description of Research Participants

	Bruce	Mia	Robert	Kate
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female
Occupation	Rural Secondary Music Teacher	Rural Secondary Music Teacher	Urban Secondary Music Teacher	Rural Secondary Music Teacher
Education	Bachelor of Music Bachelor of Education Fine Arts Diploma Master of Education Administration	Bachelor of Music, Bachelor of Education, Master of Education in Curriculum Studies with a Concentration in Secondary Music	Bachelor of Music Education	Bachelor of Music Bachelor of Education in Music Education Diploma in Education (in Counseling) Master of Arts in Music Education
Teaching Experience	30 years	25 years	27 years	13 years
Educational Levels Taught	6–12	K–12	K–12	K–12

Each of the four case studies included three observations of rehearsals and/or performances of the participants' wind ensembles. I used a prepared guide to make notes during each observation and completed an in-person interview with each participant. As a measure of trustworthiness, I provided interview transcripts, observations, and a draft paper to participants for their review. Once each participant confirmed they had been authentically represented, I analysed the collected data using individual and cross-case analysis.

Results

Brief Individual Analysis

In this section, I provide a brief overview of Bruce, Mia, Robert, and Kate. In the interviews, I asked participants to describe their professional and musical identities, conducting backgrounds, and their similar or differing responsibilities as educators and conductors. The questions also explored their approaches to short-term and long-term planning, rehearsal strategies, and evaluating student learning. Individual themes that emerged from the educators' data are discussed before analyzing broader patterns in the cross-case analysis section.

Bruce

“So, in my environment as a conductor, the most important thing for me is for everybody to feel like they can express and fail without judgement and be provided with the opportunity to improve” (Bruce, 2025).

Bruce is a rural secondary music educator (grades 6–12) whose leadership style emphasizes safety. He states “...to be an artist of any kind, you need to be a risk taker,” and without “...a safe environment to do that in, then you'll just shut down.” He believes this environment is essential in his classroom, stating students' need to be comfortable making mistakes and growing from those experiences to learn in a music-making environment.

In the interview, Bruce commented that playing is the top priority in rehearsal, and his teaching approach reflects this. In large ensemble rehearsals (grades 9–12), he paces his instruction to not attend solely to smaller sections or individuals. He emphasizes involving the entire band, where possible, to keep the attention of the members better and keep students

playing. In individual grade classes, he has a better opportunity to teach fundamental musical concepts to students.

Mia

“... [Conducting] should be... gestures of helping out the music part, breathing... The focus should not be on me. If it's on me, then we're distracted” (Mia, 2025).

Mia is a rural secondary music educator (grades 9–12) and describes her professional identity as a “band director before a music teacher”: “Well, I will happily teach other things that are musical, but I'm definitely the most comfortable and at ease when I'm teaching instruments.”

Mia considers rehearsals to be an opportunity for teaching—performances are the only time she focuses solely on conducting gestures. She states, “...if you're standing up there conducting, you're not the one making music—you're assisting it. The conducting part is me helping them to get the best show they can. But, during the rehearsals, it's teaching.” She views her conducting as facilitating her students’ music-making, stating her gestures should convey herself aiding students’ learning in performance and rehearsal settings.

Mia identifies challenges when evaluating a musical product: “Just blindly evaluating someone in a particular moment is something I don't really find very useful—that's not teaching.” She highlights the subjective nature of evaluation, claiming that assigning numerical values in music “seems arbitrary” and “too technical.” However, Mia recognizes that real-world performance is an evaluation of a product, and performers receive only a single chance. Therefore, she incorporates performance-based evaluations to build both student performance skills, and their capacity for self-critique, enabling them to continue to develop as musicians beyond the context of the music classroom.

Robert

“You should be having fun during the performance. And if you're not, you didn't work enough in rehearsal” (Robert, 2025).

Robert teaches grades 9–12 wind ensemble. He defines his professional identity as both an “educator and conductor”: “As an [music] educator in the school system, you're a teacher all the time.” He also sees his “musician” identity as integral to his professional role. As a drummer with a rock background, he often programs music with challenging rhythms and describes his rehearsal approaches stemming from a percussionist perspective.

With mainly extracurricular wind band classes, Robert prioritizes student engagement. Only his grade 9s can enroll in band for course credit and receive a formal grade, whereas his grades 10–12's participation is solely extracurricular. Additionally, he only rehearses his ensemble weekly after school for an hour and a half. This limited rehearsal schedule influences the variety and number of repertoire choices (Robert may include up to 25 pieces at a time). Robert credits this approach with his need for member participation, stating, “I think the volume and variety is important. We're not perfect, but if we just wanted to spend all our time on three pieces to go to a festival somewhere, I think students would lose interest.”

Robert equals success with student enjoyment: “When you see smiles on their faces after a piece, where they know that they put in the hours and they hear the reaction, they understand that as a group, we've done that... that's success.” His students' success is defined by their enjoyment of the music-making process. In rehearsals and performances, he aims to ensure students feel a passion for performance.

Kate

“The music is better because of the environment, and the environment is better because they're strong players” (Kate, 2025).

Kate is a Grade 9–12 high school music educator in a rural community. She sees herself as a teacher, musician, and a conductor—roles that are interlinked, not oppositional. These identities are interconnected in her praxis as she is "developing concepts all the time" and teaching for students' musical independence. Kate uses social constructivist approaches on the podium to accomplish her goal by engaging in ongoing dialogue with the ensemble and prompting them to evaluate themselves and critically think about the music.

Cultivating a positive classroom environment is paramount for Kate. She states, "I feel like building that environment is the most important thing. Then, you can get to the music." She describes her model as democratic: she aims to include student voices in the learning process and cultivate a positive environment to serve the music.

Cross-case Analysis

In this section, I compared emerging themes across the four music educator case studies to highlight both shared and differing challenges, strategies, and philosophies in their teaching. These findings build on the individual analyses to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' approaches.

Educators' Philosophies

I examine the participants' philosophical approaches to their ensembles based on classroom observations and their interviews. Key themes that emerged were the participant's interlinked educator-conductor identities, differing leadership styles, and their incorporation of formative assessment in evaluations.

The educators of the study described their educator-conductor identities as interconnected; they didn't distinguish between their responsibilities as an educator vs. as a conductor. The participants' belief connects to Dolloff's (2007) exploration of music educators' multiple identities, which found educators inhabit multiple identities simultaneously, but they may draw more heavily on one identity depending on classroom needs. For example, Kate stated that her practice of culturally responsive pedagogy, specifically regarding diverse repertoire selections, engages her identity as an educator more than her "conductor" identity, but both support each other. The participants did not distinguish between their responsibilities as an "educator" vs. "conductor" as they drew from both identities simultaneously in their practice.

Additionally, their identities as "performers" contributed to their teaching practice. Robert and Bruce mentioned using instruments in rehearsals and performances to play alongside students. They describe instruments as a better model for musical ideas in band classes as opposed to using solely their voice. Robert stated his praxis and program decisions stem from his drummer background, affecting his repertoire choices and rehearsal strategies.

When describing their leadership styles, the participants focused on musical elements or social development. Mia and Robert described focusing on the ensemble's music-making, aiming to build a performance-focused classroom culture. For example, Mia used a facilitative

leadership style in her classroom to aid her students in reaching a high-performance standard, and Robert used a democratic leadership style by including his students' input for repertoire selection to motivate their desire to perform. In contrast, Kate commented in her interview her classroom goal was team building and inclusivity, and Bruce described his as student safety; both leadership styles linked to characteristics of Maddix's (2023) "servant leadership" model. When comparing their beliefs to Maddix's (2023) description of servant leadership, Maddix stated that prioritizing social learning was an option. Kate and Bruce framed it differently: in their teaching, the environment is paramount for students' learning. They had to prioritize the social elements of their classroom before teaching the music to ensure students' success.

While participants expressed prioritizing student development during rehearsals, they had differing perspectives on whether formative assessments should be included in summative evaluations. Three of the participants described attempting to incorporate assessments and evaluations in students' marks. For example, Robert and Bruce commented that their approach to evaluation uses playing tests as a summative evaluation, but they provide feedback and multiple attempts for the students to complete the test to reflect their growth. However, Kate stated that a summative evaluation should strictly measure the final product. Mia and Bruce supported elements of this belief by stating there is the need to evaluate the live element and the "single chance" nature of a performance to develop students' performance skills. These findings suggest Lautzenhezier (2000), Wasiak (2013), and Wiggins' (2014) description of authentic assessments should be included in secondary classroom outcomes, as students require skills acquired during both the musical learning process and production of the final product (i.e., performance).

Educators' Practice

In this section, I examine the teaching practices of the four participants based on their observations and interview data. Key themes include teaching priorities shifting depending on timeline, the use of performance and educational rehearsal strategies, and the prioritization of physical conducting gestures.

Three participants described shifting their teaching priorities depending on their concert timeline. In the beginning of the year, Mia, Bruce, and Robert stated they focus on educational outcomes and shift to performance outcomes as concert deadlines approach. Robert emphasized “front-loading” conceptual teaching earlier in the year, and Bruce and Mia stated that concert deadlines may cause them to abandon certain curriculum points to achieve a high-performance standard. The participants’ teaching priorities shifted throughout the semester to accomplish their responsibilities as an educator (i.e., meeting curriculum outcomes) and conductor (i.e., performing a high-quality concert). However, Kate was an outlier. She stated she may use a more defined hierarchy of rehearsal priorities near concerts, but the performance schedule is not the sole influence on her rehearsal structures. Her pedagogical goals remain consistent throughout the semester, and she aimed to develop concepts all the time.

When comparing the participants’ contrasting approaches, the curricular and extracurricular structures of their band programs seemed to affect their ability to focus on developing students’ conceptual knowledge. For example, Bruce’s ensemble rehearsals were mostly extracurricular, and he had the least amount of rehearsal time (an hour and a half a week). Bruce and Mia also stated their rehearsal time was mainly extracurricular as well, as their classes

were semester based.¹ In contrast, Kate mainly rehearsed in school hours, and her band program followed a year-long credit structure. She rehearsed her band classes for about an hour every second day, resulting in her being the participant with the most rehearsal time. The findings suggest educators with curricular ensembles can focus more on teaching for a musical understanding while also meeting performance standards, whereas those with extracurricular ensembles may need to shift their priorities more depending on rehearsal timelines.

In their rehearsals, the educators used both educational and performance-based strategies. To meet high performance standards, all participants used strategies of modelling and repetition to develop students' performance skills. They mainly approached performance outcomes through teaching by rote. Bruce, Robert, and Mia also discussed "quality repetitions" in their rehearsals, where students can learn the repertoire and methods of practicing through "good run-throughs." For educational goals, Kate, Mia, and Bruce included an ongoing dialogue with students to encourage critical thinking about music and student musical independence, connecting to social constructivist educational practices. Kate, especially, focused on this in her classroom by engaging students through getting them to evaluate their own playing and asking them why they were making certain musical decisions. The participants tended to reflect models of recommended practice for rehearsal strategies described by Wasiak (2013) and Wiggins (2014). They did not demonstrate a disconnect from research in their praxis as suggested by Tan (2017).

Contrary to Misenhelter (2000), Wasiak (2013), and Tan's (2017) distinction between "running a rehearsal" vs. "teaching a lesson," participants did not perceive this difference. For

¹ A semester-based band program means students will receive course credit and in-school rehearsal hours for a single semester. During the remaining school year, students' participation is extracurricular and often outside regular school hours. In contrast, a year-long credit structure for a band program describes where students can receive course credit and in-school rehearsal hours throughout the entire school year.

example, Mia stated that the lessons pop up naturally from the repertoire. She described both educational and performance-based rehearsal strategies synthesizing in her practice, resulting in no distinction between a rehearsing and teaching. The participants described a similar sentiment: concepts are derived from the repertoire, and the repertoire is mainly the curriculum. They likened it to their interconnected educator-conductor identities.

In their professional practice, all participants prioritized their physical conducting skills. Kate had an extensive conducting background and values her work as "a strong conductor" because it is "hugely influential on the process and the product," a sentiment described by all participants. Additionally, Kate and Mia talked about score study as essential in their planning. They described it as a tool to identify and anticipate challenges before beginning rehearsals with students. All the participants described conducting as an important tool, and typically the primary method, to teach their band students.

Additional Themes: Socio-cultural Challenges

Additional themes that emerged were the socio-cultural challenges music educators face in their professional roles, specifically music education advocacy and COVID-19 pandemic's effect on band programs. Kate stated the importance of advocating for music education in the school system: "...a lot of other subjects don't have to advocate for their existence." Wasiak (2013) describes advocacy as "the primary concern" in Canadian music educators' professional practice (36). Kate described the need for advocacy in her program and her fears for wind ensembles across Canada.

I don't know if you follow the Canadian Band Association on Facebook, but they're talking a lot about all the programs that are being cut in Ontario, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia... So, the more your parents and community are engaged [with the band program], then the more support you have and the less danger your program is in of being cut.

As a conductor, she uses her platform to advocate for instrumental music programs.

Another theme arising from the case studies is the pandemic's effect on wind band programs and the resulting increased access to technology. Robert stated, "After COVID, it was hard to get started because we had that year and a half that we couldn't really do anything with band instruments. So, we're just trying to build the program up again." Kate similarly discussed rebuilding her program. As technology use increased in response to socio-cultural forces, Bruce and Robert described struggling with students' motivation and behavior. Bruce stated, "I think technology has kind of watered down our society in a way... So, the real things that you need to do and the time they require are eliminated because technology is all about finding a faster way to do it. Well, there's not a faster way to learn how to play the saxophone." Both teachers describe a challenge with motivating students outside technology, with Robert reinforcing "expectations of ignoring those distractions at the beginning" in students.

Conclusion

In this paper, I presented a study examining how four music educators in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick balance performance and educational goals in their secondary band ensembles. The data revealed similarities in the participants' approach to rehearsal strategies, balancing conductor and educator responsibilities, and designing developmentally appropriate outcomes for secondary students. First, the educators identified their conducting skills as essential in rehearsal contexts and used educational-focused (i.e., critical thinking and social constructivist approaches) and performance-focused (i.e., repetition and modeling) strategies to develop students' musical understanding and performance abilities respectively. Second, the participants

described their educator-conductor identities as interconnected but cycled through their various identities depending on classroom context. For example, participants drew more on their “educator” identity and focused on conceptual teaching earlier in the year, whereas they drew more on their “conductor” identity closer to concert deadlines to meet performance standards. Third, formative assessments were constantly ongoing in the educators’ practice. However, the participants had differing views on whether summative evaluations should reflect a student’s musical development or product; three participants identified that evaluating a performance built performance skills in their students.

This study offers insight into Maritimes music educators’ praxis. For in-service educators, the findings suggest teachers should develop their conducting skills through professional learning opportunities (such as symposiums or workshops), as conducting gesture was the primary method of instruction for the participants. Similarly, the findings emphasize incorporating both educational and performance-based rehearsal strategies in the classroom to develop students’ performance skills and teach for a musical understanding respectively. The data also highlighted that curricular ensembles protect music teachers’ time with their students and affected what teachers could accomplish during rehearsal. Future music education advocacy should focus on wind ensemble’s program structures, as it deeply effects students’ musical development.

Educators balancing performance and educational outcomes is a rising area of inquiry (Misenhelter 2000; Allsup and Benedict 2008; Morrison and Demorest 2012; Wiggins 2014; Tan 2017; Forrester 2018; Concina 2023; Panetta 2024). Future qualitative research could expand the scope by examining teachers over longer periods, especially since the data suggested music educators’ balance of performance outcomes and educational goals may be dependent on their

concert schedule. Researchers could also explore varying geographical contexts and other musical ensembles (such as choral, jazz, and orchestral) and levels of education to identify similar or differing strategies used in other classroom contexts. These case studies perspectives are invaluable in understanding the inner workings of the music educator.

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