

**Can Silence Be Golden? Using Quiet Time to Manage the Music Classroom**

An Action Research Project

EDUC 480: Urban Education in Theory, Policy and Practice

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**Abstract:**

The purpose of this paper is to share the results of a short-term study that focused on comparing two methods of student-centered classroom management in the context of an urban high school music classroom. Classroom management in any context is an important subject; finding methods that address both teacher preparation and attitude and student involvement and focus is a vital component of this subject. This paper will share the findings of a study that examined the results of offering an incentive for students' on-task behavior (reactive method) versus involving students to share a "quiet reflective time" before rehearsal (pre-emptive method).

**Introduction/Area of Focus:**

Managing a classroom of music students, especially instrumental students, is difficult due to a number of unique circumstances encountered in a typical high school music classroom. There are many students – as many as 50 or more – in class at one time, and they all must work together at, literally, the same speed to accomplish the common goal of making music for public performance. These circumstances make off-task behavior especially distracting; understandably, any problems that occur with one or two students in this context disrupt the flow of the rehearsal and, therefore, the entire group's process toward that goal.

During the early weeks of my internship in a Midwestern urban high school band classroom, I observed many instances of off-task behaviors within the introductory level band. Because this group had so many more technical and foundational topics to study in addition to regular rehearsal of pieces for their concert, these off-task behaviors were extremely detrimental to the progress of the band as a whole.

My project, therefore, was to address the off-task behaviors that I had observed, both with my supervising teacher and within my own practice. Rehearsal momentum is easily lost when students engage in off-task behaviors (such as talking or playing out of turn), which in turn creates a loss of productivity. My main goal was to increase student focus and decrease disruptive, off-task behaviors, thereby increasing productivity and promoting constructive rehearsing.

In order to accomplish these goals, I tried two strategies for increasing and focusing student attention. The first, and to me most intriguing, was to implement a regular "quiet time": two minutes of complete silence from the ensemble before we began rehearsing. My violin teacher uses this technique in my own lessons; the quiet time serves to calm my nerves, let go of outside distractions, and focus my attention on the music.

My other strategy, in the interest of involving students, was to ask them if they had any input or insight into the issue of classroom management. I did this in the hope that they would be able to suggest one or two of their own student-centered methods for increasing focus during rehearsal. The students suggested an incentive-based method of management: namely, a period of time at the end of the week in which they were allowed to socialize.

**Research Questions:**

My research questions addressed three facets of the classroom management issue:

- Will the quiet time method of classroom management be effective in promoting productive rehearsal?
- Will the students prefer their own suggested management method to the quiet time method?
- Does student preference play into the effectiveness of these classroom management techniques?

### **Literature Review:**

The vast majority of sources I reviewed focused on teacher-centered behaviors in order to improve student focus and on-task rehearsal time; essentially, teachers must pace their activities so that students simply don't have time to get off-task (Bauer 2001). This is easy to do when rehearsing the entire ensemble, but considerably more challenging when a smaller group inside the large ensemble needs to rehearse a specific section.

There are a number of different approaches to handling this particular problem. Kirk Kassner (1996) suggests that students, like corporations, need a structured and regular system of management; the quiet time method, if enforced regularly, could fit this mold. Kassner also encourages teachers to offer incentives for positive behavior, which happens to fall in line with my students' suggestions for their own management. The idea to ask students for input comes from a 2003 article which promotes asking students to come up with their own ideas for management in order to positively influence their attitudes toward it (LaCombe).

My own research, unfortunately, found nothing on instituting any kind of quiet or reflective time as a means to control disruptive behaviors in the classroom, which brings an intriguing angle to the question; is it under-researched because no one has thought of it yet? Or is it under-researched because no one has found it to be effective?

### **Data Collection Methods:**

My data collection fell into three areas: pre-implementation, implementation, and post-implementation.

In the pre-implementation stage, I acted as a passive observer for two class periods in order to determine a "baseline" level of noise and off-task behaviors. This allowed me to determine whether or not a change in noise level and number of off-task behaviors occurred during the implementation time.

Then, to begin the implementation, I conducted an informal ethnographic interview of the entire class. First, I introduced the topic of classroom management in the context of my own focus issues during violin lessons. Then, I asked a series of questions to determine student attitudes toward rehearsal and solicit suggestions for management from the students themselves:

- When is it harder for you to focus on playing?
- Why is it harder to focus?
- How do you feel about playing music? How do you feel about the amount of time that you spend playing during class? (Would you like to spend more time in class rehearsing?)
- What would make it easier to focus during rehearsal?

After this point, thanks to the suggestions from students, I spent one week – three class periods, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, during the regular hours of my internship – on

each classroom management method. During this time, I observed as an active participant; as with pre-implementation, these observations focused on the level of noise and off-task behaviors during rehearsal.

Finally, after the implementation period, I assessed student preferences and attitudes using a Likert Attitude Scale (see Appendix A).

### **Ethical Considerations:**

I believe that classroom management, as an issue, extends outside the classroom; the ability to focus and self-regulate off-task behavior is an important one for students to apply to their everyday lives. Through offering a questionnaire and otherwise incorporating student input, I hope to communicate to these students that keeping quiet and paying attention for rehearsal isn't just about authority, or forcing a kind of control; it is about communicating respect, especially in a teaching and learning context.

I explained a large part of my project to my students, in order to encourage their own ideas for classroom management and solicit their preferences for either method. As an informed part of the process, they were able to reflect – at least a little – on what they need in order to be attentive, interested, active participants in their own learning.

During the evaluation process, I gave students the option of attaching a name to their evaluation of the classroom management techniques; in this way, I hope they felt comfortable answering the questionnaire honestly. I did not obtain personal or sensitive information on the students, as I did not need to connect specific students to specific opinions on the classroom management techniques.

I hope that, in addition to honing their ability to calm down and focus on a relatively difficult task over the course of a class period (in order to work toward a common goal), students had the opportunity to think about their own preferences and ideals concerning constructive use of the rehearsal time. Also, with the anticipated progress toward the goal of public performance, I hope the students reached a sense of accomplishment through hard work, focus, and dedication.

There were no unintended consequences of either the questionnaire or the proposed classroom management techniques. I referred to the 'quiet' time as just that – quiet – so as to avoid references to meditation or prayer; also, the questionnaire items were worded in such a way as to elicit only information about management in the classroom context.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation:**

During the pre-implementation period, my passive observation showed that, on average, over a quarter of rehearsal – ten of approximately 40 minutes – was wasted due to students' off-task behaviors. In most cases, each instance of the behavior was relatively short-lived; the most common example was that of a student (or group of students) continuing to play after the supervising teacher had indicated that the group should stop. In other instances, a total of four times during the observation period, the band's collective noise level grew to the point where the supervising teacher had to stop explaining a concept and wait for the group to quiet down again. While some students were immediately responsive to the supervising teacher's quieting technique – raising one hand, or raising a finger to the mouth in a 'shhh' motion – many students were

completely oblivious and continued to talk or play until asked by another student to quiet down.

At the outset of my intervention, during the informal ethnographic interview, students revealed to me that they enjoyed spending class time playing; they, in fact, wanted to spend more of their 55-minute period devoted to rehearsal. While they enjoyed playing, however, they also said that it was harder to focus on playing when they had assignments due or tests coming in their other classes. Even though they wanted to play, they also wanted to study or finish their assignments; many students also wanted to have time to talk to their friends, since their schedules didn't otherwise allow for them to see one another. As stated earlier, their proposed solution to enhance focus was to have a goal to focus on and motivate them: to end rehearsal ten minutes early at the end of the week, provided that they rehearse effectively during the week. I thought this was fair, considering that easily five times that amount of time was wasted before implementation began.

After this introductory conversation, the change in classroom atmosphere was immediate: students seemed more interested and focused in rehearsal, and were more responsive to quieting down when given the same signals as before. During the week in which quiet time was observed before rehearsal began, the amount of time wasted due to talking or playing out of turn dropped to an average of just under six minutes. This is a small gain – smaller than I would have liked – but it translates to twenty additional minutes of rehearsal per week, or about half a day of regular rehearsal. Also, students had to be signaled to be quiet only twice during this period. This is especially impressive considering the initial difficulty in actually implementing quiet time: many students fidgeted and made noise during the first quiet period on Monday, though they improved drastically in the second and third periods (on Wednesday and Friday, respectively). While this is a distinct improvement over the baseline level of noise, it was difficult to tell if the quiet time really had an impact on student behavior.

The other management method, suggested by the students, fared about the same; students talked or played out of turn for an average of six minutes during rehearsal. Interestingly enough, some students had a hard time focusing on their incentive for staying focused. They had to be signaled to be quiet three times, once on each day; on each occasion, one or two students would remind the rest that they would lose their free time if they continued talking or playing. As with the quiet time observations, it is impossible to judge if the change was due to the implementation of an incentive, or simply having a conversation about the issue in the first place.

After the implementation period, the questionnaire that the students were given indicated interesting, if not entirely surprising, results. First, students still looked forward to rehearsal, as indicated by an average score of 4.03 (where Strongly Agree corresponded to a score of 5 and Strongly Disagree corresponded to a score of 1); they also wanted more time devoted to rehearsal (average score of 3.97). When it came to preferences regarding classroom management methods, students responded positively to the incentive time (average score of 4.52), whereas they were neutral to the implementation of quiet time (average score of 2.98). The questionnaire results imply that students rather strongly preferred to have incentive time; this is especially intriguing considering that both methods had equally mixed results in practice.

**Action Plan:**

Based on the results of this study, I have come to several conclusions concerning the effectiveness of student-centered management methods in the music classroom. First, it is beneficial for students to have an impact on the way their classroom is run; asking students to reflect on their own practices – and ways to improve those practices – helps students feel more connected and invested in their classroom experience. It also allows students to see the teacher as a fellow learner as opposed to a rigid authoritative figure.

As far as the quiet time method is concerned, I feel that there is potential for it to gain success in the classroom, provided a few criteria are met in its next implementation:

- First, it must be made part of the normal classroom routine earlier. Since this is meant to be a regular part of the classroom experience, it should be made part of that experience as other habits and routines are developing. In this instance, it seemed that students were just becoming accustomed to it when, due to time constraints, we had to switch methods.
- Second, in order for it to be most effective, it needs to be implemented more consistently than I was able to do in the context of my internship. Because I was only in the classroom three times a week on alternating days, I do not know what went on in the days I was not present; accordingly, the quiet time method was not used during these days, which also hindered its integration into the regular classroom routine.
- Finally, there must be consensus among the students and teacher concerning what, exactly, quiet time means and what it entails; during the short implementation time, it was evident that students weren't entirely sure what to do during quiet time other than to keep from talking. In this instance, a discussion of the purpose of quiet time, in the context of performing it during rehearsal, would be beneficial.

**Summary:**

There are many methods that music teachers can use to reduce off-task behaviors and encourage focus in students. Though there are few that actually focus on encouraging students to regulate their own behavior, there is potential for these methods to be successfully developed and used within the classroom. As with any routine behavior, however, consistency and early implementation are key to establishing a beneficial pattern.

**References:**

Bauer, William I. "Classroom Management for Ensembles." *Music Educator's Journal*, Vol. 87, No. 6 (May 2001), pp. 27-32.

This source gave more detailed information on how teachers themselves can control the pacing and activities to limit off-task behavior in the music classroom. I hope to integrate these ideas as a baseline for my project, as I want to focus on comparing student-based management ideas (i.e, offering incentives and quiet time) rather than teacher-based management ideas (pacing and choice of activities).

Gordon, Debra G. "Classroom Management Problems and Solutions." *Music Educator's Journal*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (September 2001), pp. 17-23.

This source identifies four levels of classroom disruption based on seriousness (from gum chewing to drawing weapons), as well as suggesting solutions to each level of disruption. This source was helpful for general classification of disruptions, as well as finding solutions that were proportional to the level of disruption in a given situation.

Kassner, Kirk. "Management Systems for Music Teachers." *Music Educator's Journal*, Vol. 82, No. 5 (March 1996), pp. 34-41.

This source, in addition to offering information on managing music classrooms (Kassner suggests that, like corporations, music classrooms need predictable, structured management systems), introduces the idea of cooperative learning, especially concerning dividing the larger ensemble into smaller cooperative groups and offering rewards and incentives for on-task behavior.

LaCombe, Joseph S. "Managing the Music Classroom: You Can!" *Music Educator's Journal*, Vol 89, No. 4 (March 2003), pp. 21-24.

This source offers a great amount of detailed information for managing the music classroom, which is applicable for preservice, first-year, and experienced teachers. The most valuable piece of this source is its advice concerning soliciting student opinions for combating off-task and disruptive behaviors.

### Appendix A: Post-Implementation Likert Scale

Please respond to the following items by drawing a circle around the response that most closely reflects your opinion: strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neutral (N), disagree (D), or strongly disagree (SD).

1. I look forward to rehearsal.
2. I would like to have more time during class devoted to rehearsal.
3. I enjoyed having quiet time before starting rehearsal.
4. I would like to continue to have quiet time before rehearsal.

Comments?