

Developing Social and Emotional Learning Skills through Secondary School Concert Bands

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Abstract

This research aimed to investigate the social and emotional skills of students through participation in secondary school concert bands. Using a qualitative approach, the study involved a focus group interview of 10-12 students who are section heads, and a semi-structured interview with the band director of each secondary school concert band that made it to the final round of competitions held in Thailand over the past five years. The result revealed that students exhibited strong self-learning capacities with respect to their social and emotional learning (SEL) skills in the following ways; a) self-awareness—they knew their strengths and weaknesses, knew how to improve themselves and were able to deal with their own feelings, b) self-management—they demonstrated effective management in their own practice routine, dealing and overcoming stress and pressure, c) social awareness—they empathised with and understood the perspectives of others and recognised their diverse backgrounds and cultures, d) relationship skills—they built strong relationships with other members, band directors and band alumni, negotiated conflict among other members and sought and offered help when necessary, and e) responsible decision making—they learned to make decisions responsibly and reasonably on behalf of their bands.

Keywords: emotional skill, secondary school concert band, SEL, social and emotional learning, social skill

Introduction

Social and emotional learning or SEL has been discussed widely in the educational context. SEL consists of five core competencies; self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005). SEL is considered as an important factor in success at school and in the workplace and also in maintaining positive relationships with families and friends (Elias & Weissberg, 2000). Consequently, when SEL has been integrated into the curricula of schools students are prepared for success at both school and in life in order to foster social and emotional competencies that allow them to be more actively involved in the learning process and develop necessary skills (Weissberg et al., 2015; Zins & Elias, 2007).

SEL can not only be incorporated into academic subjects, but also other activities aimed at developing students' ability to get along and manage their emotions in order to be successful in work and life (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Weissberg et al., 2015; Zins & Elias, 2007). Music activities such as

school music ensembles seem to be a good example. Studying a musical instrument can help in developing various psychological and social skills as well as self-perception (Devroop, 2012; Ros-Morente et al., 2019). The development of Western music bands is a challenge for secondary schools in Asian countries (Hebert, 2012). As for Thailand, Western music activities are quite popular among secondary school students, and a number of secondary schools there have developed large musical ensembles that go by various names such as wind band, wind symphony, symphonic band, and philharmonic wind. Some of these ensembles were established to serve activities at the school or in nearby communities, while others were formed for competitive purposes both locally and internationally.

In Thailand, the number of primary and secondary schools under the Office of The Basic Education Commission (OBEC) is approximately 39,970 (Office of The Basic Education Commission, 2013). Each school mostly arranges music activities for students, especially larger schools where concert bands are often organised as one of the activities. These bands usually comprise one full-time music teacher and/or one coach, depending on the budget, and approximately 30-80 students. In addition, various government and private agencies organise and continuously support music activities in order to provide students with opportunities to perform and improve their musical skills. However, from available statistics, there are approximately ten school bands which have achieved consistent success at national and international competitions and are acknowledged among secondary school music band management.

The success of music bands depends not only on musical mastery, but also various aspects, such as SEL and the well-being of band members (Carlisle, 2013; Edgar, 2016a). SEL is involved in effective music practicing and performing, for example regulating one's own emotions during practice, before and after performance, managing performance anxiety and establishing and maintaining relationships with members of the band and the band director (Farrington et al., 2019; Zhai et al., 2015; Zins & Elias, 2007). In Thailand, SEL was implemented in the study of specific group of students, for example, students with special needs, gifted students, or the study of students by ages and levels which mostly emerged in educational disciplines (Songnuan, 2008). For example, the study by Nilrat (2010) on the development a social and emotional learning program for fourth to sixth grade students, the study by Wongupparaj and Khayankij (2018) about the guidelines of social and emotional learning in preventing and solving emotional and behavioral problems of preschoolers and the study of SEL on the secondary school students under the Office of the Basic Education Commission by Inta and Sakulsriprasert (2018). However, no research regarding SEL has been carried out related to music disciplines and the potential of group music such as music ensembles to improve students' SEL, it is interesting to examine to what extent participation in a school music ensemble can help students develop SEL. This study, therefore, aimed to investigate the SEL of students through participation in secondary school music ensembles. The results will provide a valuable guide for education institutions or music band directors who are looking to modify their music programs towards helping students develop SEL. Additionally, the result will be beneficial in Thailand's context in rationalising music study at school and why music activities like concert bands should be arranged in all schools.

What is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?

Social and emotional learning or SEL is the capacity to recognise and manage one's own emotions, solve problems effectively, set and achieve positive goals, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions and handle interpersonal situations effectively (Payton et al., 2008; Zins & Elias, 2007). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2005) has categorised core social and emotional competencies into five groups as follows:

- **self-awareness:** knowing one's own strengths and weaknesses; being able to assess own feelings, interests and values; maintaining as well-grounded sense of self-confidence; and being optimistic with a growth mindset
- **self-management:** regulating one's own emotions and managing stress effectively; controlling impulses; expressing emotions appropriately; and motivating oneself to set and achieve goal

- **social-awareness:** empathising with and understanding the perspectives of others; and recognising their diverse backgrounds and cultures
- **relationship skills:** establishing and maintaining relationships with others; resisting inappropriate social pressure; negotiating interpersonal conflict; and seeking and offering help when needed
- **responsible decision making:** making constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms and respect for others; and applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations

SEL has a positive impact on many areas, for example, improving academic performance and physical health, regulating emotions, fostering healthy behaviors, building good relationships among students as well as between students and teachers (Doikou-Avliidou & Dadatsi, 2013; Zhai et al., 2015; Zins & Elias, 2007). Also, SEL competencies have connections with 21st century skills, for instance, creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, adaptability, flexibility, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-culture skills, productivity and accountability and leadership and responsibility (Rácz et al., 2015). The 21st century skills are core elements that are important for social interaction and career as well as of quality citizens of society.

SEL & Music Education

Music education and SEL are complementary to each other by their nature (Edgar, 2013). In addition, SEL can be developed through music education (Edgar, 2016b). Pellitteri (2006) discussed five ways that music education and SEL learning are compatible as follows:

- **music can be used as an emotional stimulus:** This can be in the form of listening to music and discussing emotional qualities.
- **music can be used as an aesthetic experience:** This is because music is connected with perceptions and feelings.
- **music can be used for relaxation and imaginary:** By playing slow music, students can relieve their stress.
- **music-making can be a form of self-expression:** Performing music can be defined as an expression of emotion.
- **music-making can be a form of group experience:** Making music together as a group can strengthen relations among group members.

Pellitteri (2006) suggested some music activities that can be used in the classroom to foster SEL. The first one is *improvisation* which helps students to release their tension and express their emotions while performing music. *Playing in an ensemble* by gathering students and having them perform music together can raise their social awareness. Furthermore, when students are asked to play to the right beat, this is a form of impulse control. In a band with a soloist, other members need to stop playing or play softer in order for the soloist to be heard, which can be considered as self-control. *Identifying emotions in music* is another example. Students can learn to identify their emotions and manage their impulses through recognising emotional qualities in music and participating in music ensembles. Through music-making, while students acquire the ability to express music, they also develop social relationships (Ros-Morente et al., 2019).

Apart from the students themselves, teachers play an important role in students' SEL development. Music teachers can help students improve their SEL skills by encouraging them to set goals for the music by themselves, encouraging them to find solutions to problems, helping to release performance anxiety and realising the power of music that can effect social change (Edgar, 2015). Furthermore, through music instruction, students as musicians are taught to be both self-aware and socially-aware. From the studies of Edgar (2016a) and Carlisle (2013), when music teachers adapt their music classes to incorporate SEL principles and allow students to set their own goals along with the teacher's suggestions, students tend to develop their SEL skills and have better relationship with the teacher. Besides, the adjustment encourages students to persist in their music activities.

In terms of performing, Higdon (2017) suggested ways in which SEL could be introduced into the music classroom. Teachers can help students to manage performance anxiety and educate them on how to cope with feelings before, during and after the performance. Students need to be guided on how to deal with disappointment when the performance does not go as well as expected. Teachers also need to encourage students to use music as a pathway to appreciate diversity; learn about other cultures and accept those who are different. Moreover, teachers can enable students to develop leadership skills by being section leaders or lead players in ensembles.

Limitation of the Study

This study focused only on students who were section heads of each school band. The researchers did not interview all students in the bands. Furthermore, the selected bands in this study had finished their competitions not over than one month.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were five Thai secondary school concert bands which had reached the final round in competitions in Thailand over the past five years, namely HW, RNB, RNM, TUN and WST. Representatives from each school band comprised 10-12 students who were section heads and had experiences in performing with the band at least two years. They were asked to participate in a focus group interview and one band director from each school was asked to participate in a face-to-face interview. However, as this study gives prominence to the students' focus group interview, the face-to-face interviews with the band directors were merely supplementary for a better understanding of the overall band management process.

Instrument

The tools used in this research for data collection were interview questions. The literature related to social and emotional learning was reviewed in order to create a framework for both the focus group interview and face-to-face interview. The questions corresponded to five core social and emotional competencies according to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2005): self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. A pilot study was conducted in order to determine whether the prepared questions were effective, reliable and suitable for participant selection. The interview questions were then adjusted before being submitted for approval by the Ethics Review Board.

Procedure

After receiving the Ethics Review Board's approval to conduct the study, the band directors were contacted via telephone to make an appointment for both themselves and the students. Both focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews took place at the interviewees' schools and were conducted in Thai for ease of communication. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The researcher used interview protocol to guide the interview process, with open-ended questions to allow participants to convey their views and perspectives in their own words (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additional questions could then be asked in response to information offered by the interviewee. Before the interviews, all participants were informed in advance and asked to sign an informed consent document and since all students are minors, an information sheet for parent or guardian needed to be signed as well. The researchers also asked for permission to record. The interviews were logged using recording equipment and the researcher took notes on the important points during the interview.

After the data was collected, the researcher transcribed it from the recording to text and the transcription was sent to the band directors and the student representatives by e-mail to check for

accuracy. The participants were given one week to proofread the transcripts, and if no responses were received from participants, it was assumed that they were satisfied with the data. After the data had been verified and approved, the coding process was carried out. This process indexes or maps the data to provide the researcher with an overview of the relationship between research questions (Elliott, 2018). The transcription was coded based on topics that corresponded to the five core SEL competencies and the topics recategorised according to each competency. To better understand the findings, the researcher reread the transcriptions and reviewed the literature to help explain the findings and attempted them to put them into context.

Results

The results reveal that the students exhibited strong self-learning capacities with respect to their emotional and social skills. Categorised following the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's five core competencies, they are presented as follows:

Self-awareness

Students from the interviews became conscious of their strengths and weaknesses, were able to evaluate themselves and knew what and how to improve. One student mentioned that all of them, as musicians, used their listening skills to judge everything he/she was playing to determine whether the quality was satisfactory or not (RWB School). One student believed that their ability to self-evaluate derived from their performance and practice experiences (RWB School).

The weaknesses that students exhibited were mostly to do with skills, such as sound quality (HW School, RNM School, RWB School and TUN School), tone color (HW School), fingerings (HW School), articulations (HW School and RWB School), tempo (HW School and WST School), dynamics (RNM School), intonations (HW School and RNM School) and sight reading (RNM School). Also, psychological issues such as stress, excitement and performance anxiety were found to be common among students (RNM School, RWB School, WST School). After students had become aware of their weaknesses, they were able to find solutions or ways to ameliorate those problems by themselves. For example, discovering new practice exercises (RWB School), recording their own performances (RWB School, WST School), creating their own exercises (RWB School), practicing different sections separately (RWB School), consulting teachers, friends, or seniors (HW School, RNM School, RWB School and WST School), watching performances on YouTube (HW School, RNM School and WST School), practicing in slow tempo (TUN School and WST School), practicing with different techniques (HW School, RNM School and TUN School), rehearsing in front of others (RNM School) and reviewing basic skills (HW School and RNM School).

From the viewpoints of the band directors, participating in a band required self-evaluation by the students. After the competition, one band director mentioned that they had a talk with all the band members and had them evaluate themselves: what the problems were, what needed to be corrected or improved, their level of satisfaction and what to do next (TUN School). Apart from the competition, the pleasure of playing music and being in the band was also important and students needed to take this matter into consideration (RNM School and TUN School). One band director stated:

I try to manage everything that makes students feel happy to be in the band. I always tell them that they need to think for themselves and if they are unhappy or don't enjoy being in the band, they can tell me. I won't be upset because music is a form of art that depends on the individual. (RNM School)

Self-management

From the interviews, students were capable of managing their own practice routine. Most of the students mentioned that, because they were section heads, they needed to practice separately (HW School, TUN School and WST School). However, they also noted that they practiced by themselves after school or after finishing practice with the band. Their practice mostly started with a warm-up and basic skills.

Apart from dealing with performance skills, most of the students said that they had to manage the stress and anxiety that occurred during their practice sessions, but could handle and overcome these issues. Some students explained:

When I'm not happy with my practice, I stop and try to relax by getting something to eat, going for a walk, or doing anything I can to recover. I'll come back to practice when I feel better because if I'm not ok, I won't be able to play well. (RWB School)

I get stressed when I can't play a scale with right fingerings. My solution is to keep practicing until I can do it. (RNM School)

In my keyboard section, there are many young members who seem to be better than me because they've been participating in many competitions and won prizes. I then wonder whether I'll be able to do like them. It's pressure. So, I resolve this by thinking that it's alright, we're in the same section, we need to help each other. I practice harder and regularly to improve myself. (HW School)

As section heads of their school band, students who took part in the interviews demonstrated effective management on behalf of their group. They started by analysing the given pieces, assigning the scores for the part each individual member had to practice first. They then got together to practice as a unit in order to check for accuracy (HW School, RWB School and TUN School). In addition, they emphasised that they set practice schedules for the band, which everyone needed to follow to achieve their goals. They decided what and how to practice, how long to practice each part and how to overcome problems that arose (HW School, RWB School and WST School).

Playing in a band together and studying at the same time requires self-discipline on the part of students and they needed to regularly manage the stress that they experienced (RWB School). Some band directors explained that students in the band were able to effectively balance their studies and practice by visiting tutors in the evening and returning for practice later (HW School). They needed to carefully schedule their practice so as to be ready for every performance (RWB School). One band director remarked that he taught his band members to be responsible, and if they were unable to perform at any event, they needed to arrange things themselves and find someone who was able to replace them on that occasion (RWB School). In addition, one band director commented that many students who played in the band were especially bright and had gained admission to study engineering at university level (HW School).

Social awareness

Students in this study showed empathy and consideration for all their bandmates regardless of how accomplished they were at music. One student stated that he understood that younger members of his section could not play some parts because when he was their age, he could not play everything well either (WST School). Additionally, students were accepting of those from different backgrounds and cultures and even when younger students demonstrated better skills, they were not envious but admired them instead (HW School, RNM School and TUN School). Some commented are as follows:

I realise that one younger member in my part can play jazz very well. I admire him and we exchange and share our knowledge quite a lot. (TUN School)

I joined this band a few years ago and there is one younger member who had joined before me. He was the better musician, but I am more mature, which means that I can handle everything in my part. So, when it comes to teaching, both of us help other members. It doesn't mean that only the section heads can teach. (HW School)

Furthermore, some students in this study tried to understand individual differences: someone is good at this but not at that. This understanding has led to the use of different methods to help them reach their goals.

There is one younger member that I need to be strict with or she won't improve, whereas with another I need to be kind and gentle so that she can do better. For me, learning to understand other members in the part is important. (RWB School and TUN School)

Female students seem to be more sensitive than male students. So I need to be careful what I say or which words I use. (TUN School)

In order for students to understand the diverse perspectives of others, the band directors of some schools invited music experts from various backgrounds to talk, teach and share their experiences with the students (HW School, RWB School and WST School). Besides that, some band directors invited band members to watch various kinds of musical performances at different venues, which was an opportunity for students to experience the wonderful sounds of music (RWB School and TUN School). Also, one school director hosted a concert involving students from other school bands and had them perform together in order for students to learn about diversity (RWB School).

Relationship skills

From the interviews, it became clear that the students were able to build positive relationships with others and develop their communication, negotiation and problem-solving capabilities while practicing with the bands. They also sought and offered help when needed. Many students mentioned that they helped each other during practice and whenever someone encountered problems (TUN School and WST School). One student pointed out that everyone needed to be prepared to adjust him/herself in order to work together as a band (RWB School).

Furthermore, students from almost all the schools claimed that, as section heads, they needed to negotiate conflict among members of the band (HW School, RNM School, RWB School and WST School). Their comments were as follows:

There are some arguments among the band members. It's all about emotions. If I need to face someone who is hot-tempered, I need to be steady and calm. (RWB School)

There are some fights between younger members. I talk to them and solve the problems. I also say that if there are more fights in the future, they will be punished. (WST School)

In my section, younger members always compete with each other. So, I gather them together and tell the whole section that we are here to enjoy music together and not to compete. We should help by teaching each other rather than competing. (HW School)

The band directors of all schools confirmed that playing in a band could help students develop social skills. Some students did not have many friends and were lonely, but when they were in the band, they could perform together and seemed to be happier (HW School). Likewise, many band directors affirmed that band members had good relationships with senior and former students of the bands because the senior students helped teach younger members and former members regularly returned to help and teach current students. This became a tradition of school bands (RWB School, WST School).

When students joined the band, the band directors agreed that they all needed to adjust themselves in order to live together (WST School). Whenever there were disagreements among students, the band directors acted as middlemen; they had students sit down and talk it through together and tried to find the best solutions for everyone (HW School, RWB School, RNM School and TUN School).

Responsible decision making

The interviews revealed that as section heads, the students learned to make decisions responsibly and reasonably. The decisions they needed to make included when to practice, the structure of each practice session, song selection, part assignments for each piece, exercise assignments for each member, the

number of members for each piece and rules for the band (HW School, RNM School, RWB School and TUN School). Although the students themselves decided most issues, sometimes they dared not make certain decisions, preferring instead to seek the advice of band directors. One student put it this way:

I'm a section leader and also a leader of this band. I need to decide everything about the band. When I first accepted this position, I didn't dare to make decisions on many things, so I asked the band director whether this was ok or what we should do. Later, the band director told me to decide by myself and only then did I dare to make decisions such as setting the rules for the band. (TUN School)

The band directors mostly allowed students to select their own section heads (HW School and TUN School). When there were events for the bands, the band directors asked other members whether they wanted to participate in those events (WST School). This allowed students to decide responsibly. As one band director explained:

Whenever there is an activity, I first tell the students about it and let them decide whether to accept this event or not. At my school, there is a concert every three months for which students themselves decide what songs are to be played, how to promote it and what to do at each stage of the process. (WST School)

Discussion

Secondary schools in Thailand arrange concert bands as one of the school activities that students can choose to participate in. This is consistent with studies which found that schools today must not only offer academic subjects but also other activities that can develop students' ability to get along and manage their emotions in order to be successful in life and work (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Weissberg et al., 2015; Zins & Elias, 2007). However, Thai schools in broader view do not really emphasise improving students' social and emotional skills and concert bands for them are only activities that they do for competitions. Despite this, the results confirm clearly that participating in concert bands can help students fully develop their SEL skills.

When students were required to practice in order to be able to play in the band, students claimed that as members of the band, they were more self-aware: they assessed their strengths and weaknesses, knew how to improve and were able to deal better with their feelings. In addition, students seemed to have strong self-management skills in managing their own practice routine as well as dealing and overcoming the stress and pressure that occurred during practice. Also, they were then able to arrange things for other band members. This subsequently taught other students how to organise their own lives by honing the skill set necessary for the 21st century, consisting of personal responsibility, accountability, self-direction, and personal productivity (Rácz et al., 2015). This proves that participating in school bands can enhance various skills necessary for student's life.

Since participation in a school concert band is a form of music activity that brings together students from different backgrounds to play music, this clearly helps them develop social awareness, which enables them to empathise with and understand the perspectives of others and appreciate their diverse backgrounds and cultures. This supports Pellitteri (2006) who argued that gathering students and having them perform music together can be regarded as social awareness and the study by Higdon (2017) and Rácz et al. (2015) that music can be used as a pathway to recognise diversity and improve social and cross-culture skills; learn about other cultures and accept those who are different. Participating in a concert band requires communication skills which can improve students' relationship skills. Students are able to build strong relationships with other members, band directors and band alumni, negotiate conflict among other members and seek and offer help when necessary.

When students need to make decisions regarding any issue, critical thinking skills are required, which means that students must think responsibly. Notwithstanding this, the band directors in this study played an important role in developing their students' decision-making skills because, although students were section heads, they were not confident in making certain decisions. This reflects Thai culture in which younger people respect their elders, so it is the band director's responsibility to help his/her students overcome particularly difficult issues. This finding agrees with Edgar (2015) who concluded

that listening, discussing and planning with students were the three most important recommendations for teachers.

Band directors are key to promoting a pleasant environment and activities that help students develop SEL skills. In helping students develop their self-awareness and self-evaluation, the band directors took time after competitions to let students evaluate themselves and to survey students' feelings. Higdon (2017) said that teachers could educate students regarding how to cope with feelings after a performance and students needed to be guided on how to deal with disappointment when the performance does not go as they expect. Moreover, it serves as an opportunity for band directors to learn from the students and evaluate the performance so as to improve the next one. Regarding self-management, the band directors taught students to be responsible for their own practice, and many band directors mentioned that they arranged concerts to help students develop both social awareness and their relationship skills.

It is clear that participating in a concert band can improve students' SEL skills in all five competencies. Furthermore, SEL skills are vital in this 21st century, especially in education and work. Therefore, it is highly important that students be equipped with universally applicable skills that prepare them to be valued members of society, ready for the challenges of the future. In Thailand's context, music is still an elective subject that parents do not fully appreciate; most parents in Thailand seemed to pay more attention on school's academic subject. In addition, there are no Thailand-specific publications that provide information regarding developing SEL skills through musical activities. This study answers the questions as to why we should study music and why musical activities like concert bands should be arranged in all schools.

Conclusion

Participating in a concert band can help students thoroughly develop their SEL skills. As a member of a concert band, students gain self-awareness by assessing their strengths and weaknesses, learning how to improve themselves and strengthening their capacity to deal with their own feelings. Students also develop self-management, through which they are able to manage their own practice routine, regulate their emotions and organise issues related to the band and its members. Playing with members from different backgrounds raises their social awareness, enabling them to empathise and understand other points of view, while better appreciating the value of diversity. Being a member of a band allows students to build positive relationships with others, and at the same time, develop communication, negotiation and problem-solving capabilities during practice with others. Furthermore, students acquire responsible decision-making skills that benefit their own circumstances and those of others in the band, not just academically, but also in other domains throughout their life.

Implications

For institutions and teachers, the results of this study as well as SEL framework itself can be used and adapted in designing music programs and curricula. Moreover, the principles of SEL can be applied in general music education classes and other music and non-music activities, both inside and outside classroom. Since the results of this study illustrate that music can help students develop their SEL skills, it is useful for band directors seeking more support for these kinds of activities. In addition, the information from this study can enhance the knowledge and skills of music teachers regarding social emotional learning and as consequence, they can select and utilise certain techniques that are most suitable for their students to help them acquire SEL skills.

Since this is a basic research, this study can be applied into an experimental research for further studies. The results from this study can be used to set and plan a rehearsal that covers all SEL competencies which aims to use for all band members, not only section heads. In addition, this study can be expanded more in terms of other aspects that are relevant to band rehearsal and SEL competencies. The final results can lead to a handbook for band directors or teachers.

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Biography

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