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### Turning points: a transitional story of grade seven music students' participation in high school band programmes

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## Turning points: a transitional story of grade seven music students' participation in high school band programmes

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As a framework for our study, a broad set of themes related to the retention of students in music programmes are presented to enhance our understanding of how to retain band students. Data were collected from grade seven students comprising four focus groups. We used ethnodrama, an arts-based educational research approach, to represent results as a research script. We found that assumptions made in previous research have little in common with what grade seven and eight students feel. Life experiences may strongly impact their decisions, band students like music and find it 'fun', and peers define band students as smart, successful, and strong individuals. The impact of the band teacher is minimal. Finally, students who choose not to continue in band often made the choice to avoid music rather than a choice to take other options.

**Keywords:** ethnodrama; narrative research; arts-based educational research; a/r/tography; band student retention; high school band

### Prelude

As elementary school music educators, we are always disappointed when students leave a band programme and choose not to continue with music in high school. Conversely, we are always thrilled to hear of former students who have continued with music throughout their high school career. From that perspective, we are interested in identifying strategies that would increase the retention rate of students from feeder elementary schools into high school band programmes. Given that young music learners come to their first instrument optimistically and with the will to learn it (McPherson and Renwick 2001), one may question what happens along the path of learning to dispel that optimism and commitment.

One of us is currently a teacher in the Langley School District in British Columbia, Canada and has held the position of band teacher in four different schools. In each of those schools the choice of whether or not to pursue band was presented differently to students. These schools are typical of the Langley School District in that there are at least four models for band programmes at the elementary school level. Some schools offer band instruction with a high school teacher attending the elementary school on an itinerant basis. Other schools have a specialist music teacher: in some of these schools, students are required to take band; in other schools they have the choice of taking band or general music. In the latter model, the programme may be either one year long or two years. Lastly, there are some schools in Langley where generalist classroom teachers teach music, and no band

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programme is offered. Thus, we are also interested in discovering whether there is a link between the type of band programme offered in elementary schools and the number of students who continue to study the subject in high schools.

Within their grade seven year, and as is typical across British Columbia school districts, students in Langley are visited by personnel from the high schools and encouraged to make their course selections. Most of their courses in grade eight are required: mathematics, English, social studies, science, physical education and a second language (usually French). That leaves very little room in their timetable for electives, and there is a variety of activities from which to choose: drama, visual art, music, technology, etc. On that level, one may question whether timetabling and the diversity of choice are a factor in whether students continue in band.

In consideration of the complexity of issues surrounding the very existence of instrumental music programmes in public schools, the purpose of this study is to identify the factors that affect the retention of students in band programmes as the students move from elementary to high school. Specifically, we wanted to examine the qualitative factors that affect the retention of students in band programmes in terms of the ways that students themselves think about their learning experience.

### Literature review

Particular themes related to the retention of students in music programmes assist with understanding how to retain band students and provide a framework for the study. Various authors cite parental support as being a key factor in whether students continue in high school while other research finds parental reminders to practice as a negative influence (Hallam 2001). Students may also lose interest in music, consider it simply a short-term hobby (Yunker and Renwick 2002), or develop interests in conflicting areas such as sports that compete for the same timetable spaces. Some students (boys) simply are not the gender that chooses music in school, that is less successful and less hardworking at it, and that identifies it as for 'cissies' (Green 2005, 89). Some authors have identified the content of the music programme as a key to retention, and still others highlight the high school band instructor as influential either in terms of communicating with elementary school students, or offering a programme to which younger students aspire to join. In many school districts across North America, band is more than merely part of the music programme – it is a culture, a place of belonging, a social activity (Adderley, Kennedy and Berz 2003), and a unique form of performance directly related to American football, marching bands, parades, patriotic celebrations, and pep-rallies as well as traditional forms of concert performance in jazz and traditional contexts.

Holtz (2001) refers to the *Gemeinhardt 4* study which surveyed over 2000 people who were directly involved in high school music programmes in the United States. From their responses, Holtz identifies nine strengths of effective music programmes: quality leadership, quality music, a tradition of excellence, a good feeder system, sufficient funding, community/school support, 'fun' programmes, good programme management and good concert programmes. Weaknesses that undermine music programmes are: minimal parental support; poor beginning music experiences; a view that music is too time consuming; and scheduling conflicts (Holtz 2001).

According to Holtz (2001), parental involvement is a key factor: if parents support the students' efforts, the students are more likely to continue with the programme.

Sandene (1994) concurs with the findings of the *Gemeinhardt Report* when he, too, recommends enlisting the support of parents. If parents do not remind children to practice, bring their instrument and materials to class, and attend concerts and assemblies, children will not perceive the band class as important a subject as other subjects for which a parent vigilantly ensures that homework is complete and accurate. If parents do not actively support continuing with band in high school, once again the student will not perceive band as important compared to other subjects that parents insist they enrol in. In terms of at-home practice, it is also important that teachers model and demonstrate for students how to practice their instrument and how to self-monitor their practicing skills (McPherson and Renwick 2001).

However, Hallam's (2001, 13) study of 55 young stringed musicians at various levels of expertise found that some resented and found annoying parental reminders to practice. Even when students are fully supported by their parents, some still give up, and indeed particular types of parental behaviour such as unrealistic expectations of their children's musical involvement may be harmful to children (Hallam 2002, 17, 235). And again, despite full motherly support of young learners, it is rather the young learners' personalities and temperaments that may contribute to their commitment to practice (McPherson and Davison 2002).

If potential students can be convinced of the academic and social benefits that accrue to members of the band programme (Dunlap 1993), and their parents are aware of those advantages, then one of the potential weaknesses identified by the *Gemeinhardt Report* (as cited in Holtz 2001) will have been avoided. Comparing a music programme to established standards can help identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth. Woody (1997, 41) suggests publishing the results of music evaluations so that the school board and administration can see the 'meaningful educational outcomes' that result from a music programme, but we would suggest that the results should also be shared with parents and students at feeder schools for recruitment purposes. From that perspective, if parents feel that the high school band programme is successful and effective then they may themselves become advocates for the programme (Woody 1997).

A student who has lost interest in playing his or her band instrument will not continue in the band programme, and most students quickly realise that playing an instrument is a tremendous amount of work (Boyle et al. 1995). Boyle et al. conducted a survey of middle-school band directors in Florida to ascertain their views of why students dropped out of music programmes. They discovered that loss of interest in band and interest in other activities were frequently cited reasons. Sandene (1994) suggests various ways to encourage students to continue with band. First, he recommends that other staff members can help: teachers, by encouraging students to attend class with their instrument, and administrators, by ensuring that scheduling conflicts do not occur and withdrawal from a band class mid-year is not permitted. In addition, scheduling emerges as a recurrent theme in North American research since grade eight students are limited in their choices of electives and must choose between survey courses of technologies, drama, visual art or band (Boyle et al. 1995; Holtz 2001; Sandene 1994). Whether students identify timetabling as one of the factors affecting retention of students in high school band programmes will be one of the foci of this research.

Music is widely recognised as an essential component of the curriculum in elementary school, but is offered as an elective at high school. Dunlap (1993) argues

that music in high school is not really about the musical development of students as much as it is about preparing for public presentations. The analysis and the history of music, the opportunity to experience the music of other cultures, and the experience of creating one's own music are regularly overlooked in favour of rehearsing for the next concert. The goal Dunlap advocates is to prepare students for 'meaningful, lifelong participation in musical activities' (1993, 33). A high school music programme that includes courses in music appreciation, world music, and composition may hold the interest of a greater number of students than a programme solely focused on performance, particularly if the emphasis of those performances is on a few elite students who are able and willing to perform solo or who, as Hallam (2001) identified, become nervous before performances. Such was the case with 90% of the young stringed musicians in Hallam's study. Rather, programmes encouraging students 'to think of music as something within the reach of all rather than a specialist activity' (Hargreaves and Marshall 2003, 272) will build on the access and knowledge that students have gained, independent of their school instruction.

The question of *what* we actually teach in music class is also examined in the work of Popkewitz and Gustafson (2002, 81) who argue that music, and indeed all school subjects, are less about teaching the subject and more about teaching students to be 'easily administered', and the question of what music can do for a student is completely ignored. In encouraging the most easily administered children to continue in band: through rewarding good behaviour with good marks and making them feel successful in music regardless of their ability to 'do' music – the teacher is not considering what is in the best interests of the child. Indeed, it may be that some of the least easily managed students could benefit the most from being included in high school music programmes.

Keeping students in the music programme also requires examining *how* the curriculum is taught. For instance, if the music task set before students can be completed with a friend, the amount and type of music discussed, composed, and performed are different from students who are not friends (Miell and MacDonald 2000). Students divided into friend pairs and non-friend pairs spent 15 minutes writing a musical composition using school instruments and then performed it for a teacher who graded it (*ibid.*, 352). Both the amount of music communication (language and musical) and the grades on the performed composition were higher for the friend pairs, especially when one of the partners was musically experienced (*ibid.*, 254–362). Retention suggestions arise from these results. Overall, shifting the teacher/conductor-fronted classroom to friends-centred may interest more students in the school music programme. This 'fun' part of a music programme can be enhanced by pairing friends without the risk of them getting off task. With the locus of learning shifted to paired friends, the binary view of music learning as 'formal=institutional' versus 'informal=outside school' is undermined, a direction proposed by Folkestad (2005) and Stalhammar (2003). Trust and confidence between friends are crucial in this context (Miell and MacDonald 2000, 366) and may address the least easily managed students mentioned above. In addition, as the quality of the paired musical performance strengthens, the quality of the programme overall may also strengthen.

Other suggestions for how to create a more interesting or 'fun' music programme include inviting musicians to the classroom, teachers playing an instrument themselves – in effect demonstrating the passion for playing an instrument; teachers actively pursuing diverse art forms in terms of attending museums, concerts, and so

on, in order to integrate multiple art forms into the music programme (Upitis, Smithrim, and Soren 1999); as well as including multiple musical practices and musical sub-cultures valued by students (Sloboda cited in Younker and Renwick 2002). However, radical changes to music programmes should be carefully administered and managed otherwise students may still lose interest in music in school (Swanwick and Lawson 1999).

Boyle et al. (1995) also discovered that a lack of communication from the high school teacher with lower grade teachers could be a disincentive for students to sign up for band. This is discussed as a potential area where high school band teachers can have a positive impact on enrolment in their programmes: visits to feeder schools, conversations with grade seven students, and opportunities to meet with parents would all be positive ways to encourage students to try out the band programme. For example, high school band teachers in the Langley School District possess a variety of methods of contacting elementary students including: performances by high school bands at elementary schools; feeder school concerts at the high schools; and a massed band where high school students play together with students from all the feeder schools. It would be useful to know whether students perceive those experiences to have any impact on their decision to enrol in high school band.

Particularly relevant to our investigation was a study by Hartley (1991) who surveyed high school band directors about enrolment and retention. Hartley concluded that the grade at which students first start playing an instrument does not affect whether they continue in the high school music programme. If the results of Hartley's study can be generalised to apply to students in the Langley School District, it is reasonable to suggest that students will be equally excited about playing a band instrument regardless of whether they have had one year or two in band at elementary school. From that perspective of Hartley's findings, one may consider that the feeder school experience has little or no effect on the students entering high school to participate in band. In contrast, Holtz (2001) determined that the feeder school experience *was* an important indicator of high school participation. This lack of consistency is a compelling reason to look closely at what that experience is and whether it promotes continued involvement in grade eight bands.

More research in the area of how to retain students in band programmes when they move from elementary to high school is obviously needed. The available research involves middle and high schools rather than elementary schools, and does not address student and parent perspectives. Moreover, it is often quantitative in nature and as such, numerically oriented, or in the case of Swanwick and Lawson (1999, 57), qualitative findings are used to *support* quantitative data. The current study aligns more with Stalhammar's (2003, 61) intention of elucidating music students' experiences with music and takes a more qualitative and empirical/experience orientation. While certain reasons for dropping out of music classes, gender and personality, may be quite difficult to change, others are not. The current study conducted in Canada will fill in some of the missing data on how students, parents, and teachers perceive the importance of parental support, loss of interest, timetabling, curriculum, and programme leadership in determining whether a student elects to take band in high school.

### **Approach to the research**

A qualitative inquiry into the reasons students have for continuing to take band enables a reader to listen to students as the researchers use their words to explain their thinking about their personal experiences. Through focus groups with grade seven and eight students, participants were invited to share their reasoning with one of the researchers taking the role of ‘active listener’ (Smith and Sparkes 2004), a facilitator who interjects prompts into the conversation of the participants to keep the dialogue focused and moving forward.

One of the researchers made contact with many band directors in the Langley School District, and four of them agreed to become part of this inquiry. Before each focus group was organised, the researcher had in-depth conversations with the band director about the topic. In one case, the band director sat in on the focus group, and in another case a band director conducted the focus group and gathered the data for us. Four different types of schools are represented in the study: a regular elementary school, a Fine Arts elementary school, a Fundamental middle school and a high school. The focus groups varied in size from three to nine students. In all, 23 students participated. Each group consisted of both male and female participants and the respective groups included students who had chosen to continue in the band programme and some who had not. The conversations in each focus group were tape-recorded and then transcribed so that the dialogues could be studied.

In a post-positivist-oriented qualitative study, the evidence would have been coded and the themes that emerged most strongly would have been evaluated. Our work with these transcripts followed more of a phenomenological approach. ‘Phenomenologists do not use coding, but assume that through continued readings of the source material the “essence” of an account will be revealed. This approach does not lead to uncovering laws, but rather to a “practical understanding” of meanings and actions’ (Devries 2000, 166–7). As we read over the transcripts, and even before that as one of the researchers conducted the focus groups, some key ideas emerged which became the basis for this writing (i.e., re/presenting the data) in a narrative/dramatic style.

The results of this research are presented in the form of a research script: a conversation among five students suspended in that indeterminate state between elementary and high school. By choosing to tell at least part of the research story through script, we take up Uptis’ (1999) invitation for researchers to represent their work in various genres such as poetic and dramatic, in order for it to be more accessible to varied audiences. Belliveau (2006) took a similar approach while investigating the impact of a drama-based project with pre-service teachers where he dramatised some of the data findings into a research script. Belliveau’s work draws from an emerging tradition in arts-based educational research that includes both written and performative components (Diamond and Mullen 2000; Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer 1995; Fels 1998, 2004; Finley and Finley 1999; Goldstein 2001; Gray 2003; Gray, Ivonoffski, and Sinding 2002; Gray et al. 2000; Mienczakowski 1997, 2001; Mienczakowski, Smith, and Morgan 2002; Pifer 1999; Rhod 2005; Saldaña 1998, 2003, 2005). The presentation of the material in a dramatic form has, we believe, helped us to avoid judgments about the students, and to avoid any suggestion that there is either a ‘right answer’ (LaBoskey 2002, 34), a single ‘truth’, or a permanent conclusion to our research inquiry. Each fictional character in the

script is a synthesis of several of the participants in the focus groups and we used the essence of what was said by the students to present the main themes that emerged from those discussions. The objective when dramatising data, according to Saldaña (2005), is to not to 'compose what your participants tell you in interviews, but to creatively and strategically edit the transcripts, assuming you wish to maintain rather than "re-story" their narratives' (Saldaña 2005, 20).

It is important to remind readers, especially when working with arts-based forms of research dissemination, that the very nature of research design – i.e. identifying the general purpose and problem, selecting a distinct segment of research literature, choosing a methodology, setting up research procedures, analysing the data, reporting and interpreting the results, and posing conclusions, suggestions, or considerations for further research, invites us to consider that there is no such thing as pure data (Gouzouasis 2007; Pepper 1942). Researchers, human beings who by their very nature and nurture possess numerous biases, are involved in every aspect of the research process. Hans Georg Gadamer, who is credited as a developer of notable features of the amodernist relational stance, posited, 'unacknowledged presuppositions are always at work in our understanding' (1981, 111). In our words, the personal perspectives of a researcher are inseparable from the research process.

Some researchers would like to lead readers to believe that their works are a presentation, or representation, of cold, hard, indifferent fact(s). However, one may question, 'which aspect of fact? Are they not different aspects of the same whole?' Gadamer suggested, 'There is no such thing as a fully transparent text' (Gadamer 1981, 106). From an arts-based perspective, it is impossible for researchers to work with data on a detached, abstract level, carefully 'culling facts' (Van Mannen 1988) in an attempt to establish authority, rigour, and power in research texts. To a great extent, all researchers write fictions: invented crafted, made, created, constructed. Some write 'factions', a term that Alex Haley (2007) coined to describe a combination of history and fiction, and yet others write 'frictions', a term used to describe conflicting narrative accounts of the same situation (Gouzouasis 2007, 256). Strathern (1987), Atkinson (1992) and Barone and Eisner (1997a, 1997b) discuss notions of how writing in either a scientific or literary style should not define or establish the validity of a piece of research. In essence, acknowledging the turmoil surrounding data, fact, and error demolishes notions of absolute certainty and reveals our deeply rooted, sincere doubts about an ultimate reality and about traditional ways of knowing (Overton 2002).

Qualitative report writing has three key features in common with narrative and dramatic writing: 'a setting in which data are collected, characters who are informants, and a plot in the form of the social action in which the characters are engaged' (Gay and Airasian 2003, 248). In the script below, the setting has been altered to provide a more realistic context for the dialogue: the students have entered into the discussion of their own accord without the prompting of a researcher. Nonetheless, the characters are the source of the information; the students clearly inform the reader(s) of their point of view as well as a perspective that neither parents nor teachers identified when they were interviewed.

Through the dramatic conversation presented, readers can witness the forces at play among these students. 'The narrative form is a primary way of ordering, structuring and coping with difficult life decisions . . . New understandings and ways of coping are generated as individuals interact, search for coherence and develop plot

forms to mediate an otherwise inexplicable life event' (Reckson and Becker 2005, 108). Through the students' interactions with each other, the reader may gain a deeper understanding of how students perceive their options, as well as their understanding of the social implications of those choices. In representing the data through drama, readers or audiences are better able to grasp and learn about the world of the participants and what it is like to live in it (Saldaña 2005).

An important caution from Becker reminds the researcher that what is left out also reflects the bias of the researcher: 'Of course, I have not told it all. Some parts of my story are omitted because they seem less directly related to the "story line"' (Becker 1997, 12). Moreover, when scripting data, a reduction of the field notes, interview transcripts, journal entries, etc. is necessary in order to foreground the 'juicy stuff' for dramatic impact; a play is life, with all the boring parts taken out! (Saldaña 1998). We feel we have included the central student ideas within the script, yet our understanding of what they were saying, and their own omission of key ideas may have skewed the meaning. In addition, the researchers' own prior beliefs and life experiences no doubt impacted on how they listened, what they heard, and what they highlighted in the research process.

### **Five corners**

*The setting is a summer camp. Two boys about 14 years old, Dylan and Connor, enter the scene in conversation.*

- Dylan: Man, thank God that's over. Cleaning up after lunch is so lame. How about we head down to the lake for a swim?
- Connor: Whatever. Actually, we could see if those girls we were talking to yesterday are there again. That really tall one, what was her name?
- Dylan: Amanda?
- Connor: Yeah, and that one that beat most the guys in the swimming race. Raine?
- Dylan: No, that's Leah.
- Connor: Oh yeah, Raine's the other one with the black hair and the weird piercings everywhere. How long is free time this afternoon?
- Dylan: Looks like . . . [*consulting schedule*] it's until 4pm when there's a soccer game. [*As the boys make their way towards the lake, they encounter two girls, Raine and Leah, who are also 14 years old.*]
- Dylan: Hi Raine. Aren't you going swimming? The water's really warm.
- Raine: I doubt whether it's any different from yesterday. Besides I don't want my new nose ring to get infected. It feels kind of sore after yesterday, and one of my friends who got her eyebrow done had like this huge bubble thingy and the stud actually disappeared into the skin and it took ages to get better. She said it was from going in a hot tub.
- Leah: I was just talking to Raine about my schedule for high school next year. I am so glad I met you here. I was feeling really awful about not knowing anyone in a new school and now I know three people – four if you count Amanda. Have you seen her?
- Connor: I think she's just getting out of the water now. Isn't that her in the blue bathing suit? [*Calling out*] Hey Amanda! Over here!

*Amanda, 14 years old, walks over, grabs her towel and backpack on the way over to where the four others are sitting. As she sits down she offers to share her Doritos, cookies, and pop with the others.*

- Dylan: Hey, where did you get this stuff? I thought we weren't allowed to bring food.
- Amanda: We're not.
- Raine: Well, I'm not asking. I'm just glad to have some real food after what they serve here. I always thought those books that talk about mystery meat were exaggerating: now I know those authors came here to summer camp! If only we could do something about that awful music they make us sing around the campfire.
- Dylan: Yeah!
- Raine: My brother and his friends have a band who could come and really put on a show for us.
- Connor: What kind of a band do they play in?
- Raine: Something between, like, Good Charlotte and Panic! at the Disco. But I guess the lyrics might not go over so well here.
- Leah: Hey, do you guys know your schedules? I'd love to know if we're in any of the same classes.
- Amanda: You don't like actually carry yours around with you do you? Like, it's summer! Give it a rest.
- Connor: I don't have my schedule but I know what courses I'm in. There isn't actually a whole lot of choice. Either you take honours or not, and you take band or Lifeskills. I wish I was in Lifeskills but my parents are making me take band. It's totally going to ruin my life. I'm gonna start high school with a reputation of being a geek before anyone even meets me.
- Dylan: Hey, I'm in band. I love it. I took it in grade 6 and 7. I find most the stuff at school so easy I was glad to have a challenge. I can't wait to play some of those harder pieces with all the different parts to them. When the high school came and played for us they had some great tunes: Star Wars theme and Harry Potter and all kinds of stuff we actually recognised.
- Leah: I took band last year but it was too hard. I'm gonna take Lifeskills because it's easier and you never get any homework. I can't stand practicing and playing by myself, and I never did figure out how to get my flute to play higher or lower notes. The first test I played was a nightmare: all the notes came out sounding the same, and everyone in the class laughed at me. I hated band. It was my lowest mark.
- Amanda: I'm not taking band. You're right, Connor, everyone will think you're a geek. Like, none of my friends are taking it.
- Dylan: Didn't you like band?
- Amanda: What's to like?
- Dylan: Playing, performing, learning something new? And how about band trips?
- Amanda: Have you ever been on a band trip?
- Dylan: No, but in high school they go on great trips. My school went to the high school one day last year and we spent all day playing with bands from other schools and the high school band and then we had a concert in the evening. It was amazing. And the teachers are so cool.

- Amanda: Yeah, we did that too. Bo-ring! The only, like, good part about the day was having lunch in the cafeteria – hot dogs, fries and Coke. I thought the teachers were, like, jerks: they yelled when people, like, made mistakes and made such a big deal out of how you, like, sit and how you hold your instrument.
- Connor: Oh great, I'm going to be a geek and the teachers are jerks. My life is over.
- Leah: Did you get to do anything else at the high school? Meet anyone else or anything?
- Dylan: Well, you met some of the other kids that will be in grade 8 band next year because they were right beside you playing the same instrument. There were only two other French horn players, and neither of them was much good. I don't think they even knew when they were playing the wrong notes! We went to the high school a couple other times as well, to meet teachers and find our way around the school a bit. I got paired up with a grade 9 girl for the day and went to all her classes.
- Amanda: Connor, how come your parents think you should take it? Like, mine could care less about band. Just, like, tell them how it is. They'll get it.
- Connor: No frigging way will they get it. My mom is totally into it: "It'll be so good for your eye-hand co-ordination. And you'll meet nice people and belong in a group." She, like, took band in high school so she thinks everyone should. It's no use even having that conversation with her.
- Leah: What if you told her you'd rather do, like, sports or something? Maybe join the volleyball team? Then you wouldn't have time to practice and there'd be no point in taking band. And you'd still be part of a team.
- Dylan: I don't get why you don't want to take band. My parents think it's great too. My dad still plays violin in the Symphony, and my sister is in grade 10 band. Next year the senior bands are going on a trip to play in Disneyland.
- Connor: Lucky them. But we won't go, will we?
- Dylan: Not this year, but when we're in grade 11 or 12 we will.
- Connor: Just our luck they'll be going to Spuzzum in our year. Besides, there's no way I'm taking band 'til then. I figure I'll get really low marks in band and then my parents will, like, tell me to drop it 'cause it will stop me from getting on the honour roll.
- Leah: How about you, Raine? Are you taking band or Lifeskills?
- Raine: Oh, band for sure. Grade 7 band was kind of boring, but I'm really looking forward to jazz band. I was the only kid in our band last year that ever like wanted to improvise. Our teacher had us play this piece through and then one person could improvise – you know, make stuff up – kind of using the same notes and rhythms but not really. Anyway, I always did it and so at our concert at the end of the year I got to play solo. It was so cool!
- Connor: I don't mind being in concerts and stuff, but I'm not getting up and playing solo. It wasn't so bad in grade 7 because everyone had to take band, but now there's a choice and I don't think I want to take it anymore.
- Raine: Did you really all have to take band? At our school we had a choice of band or 'general music' where they did singing and played recorder and learned about composers.
- Amanda: Man, that sounds boring.
- Raine: I don't know, I took band.
- Dylan: What happens if you didn't take band in grade 7, can you still do band in grade 8?

- Raine: I don't know. Not many of the kids from my school are going on in band. Maybe 10. I know one girl who can't take band 'cause her parents can't afford it. So you're lucky, Connor.
- Connor: Unlucky, you mean! I wish I was too poor to rent a band instrument. Only the dorkiest kids from my school are going to be in band, and people are going to think I'm one of them. None of my friends are taking it. They all get to do cooking and woodwork and electronics and all the fun stuff. I just get to do all the extra hard work in band.
- Leah: You sure are down about it. What instrument do you play?
- Connor: Flute.
- Amanda: OMG!
- Connor: What?
- Amanda: Geeksville. Why not switch to something good like trumpet or sax if you have to play at all?
- Connor: I was thinking of taking up piccolo as well.
- Amanda: No, I mean, like, switch to something else that's not as geeky.
- Connor: I'll think about it. That might make it more fun – playing a different instrument.
- Leah: Are you good at playing the flute?
- Connor: I'm okay.
- Leah: A lot of the kids from my school that were good at their instruments are still taking band in high school. The ones that weren't so good all dropped out. It's not that they really want to take Lifeskills, it's just that they don't want to take band.
- Raine: Yeah, I think you've got a point there. The ones that got good at their instrument seem to like band more and want to go on. Almost all the kids from my school that signed up for band are taking honours as well.
- Amanda: What for?
- Raine: What do you mean?
- Amanda: Like, why take honours? You can get better grades and do less work in the regular classes and no one is going to think you're a geek.
- Raine: I'm taking honours 'cause I want to go somewhere with my life. Like maybe work in the recording industry or even be a musician. But I want to go to college – that's pretty much the only way to get a good job.
- Dylan: That's what my Dad says, too. I'm in honours.
- Leah: Well, I'm not. I'm going out for the volleyball and the basketball team and I have ice hockey three times a week, so there's no way I'd have time to do all the homework.
- Amanda: I'm sure not, like, looking for any extra work. Whatever happened to people having fun when they're kids? My friends and I are planning on having a good time at high school. We've been planning stuff for ages, like going to the corner store at lunch and walking down to the mall after school.
- Raine: That's interesting, isn't it? Two of us in band and honours and two not in band and not in honours. That leaves you Connor. Are you in honours or not?

*The piece ends in a tableau with eyes on Connor.*

### **Reflections on the story**

When we first conceived the idea of investigating the reasons that students do not continue in high school band programmes, we thought we knew the answers. A review of the literature confirmed some positivist impressions. We believed that the teacher was critical to the success of the programme. We thought that the musical experience of the family of the student and the environment in which they lived played a huge part. We assumed that the offerings of the high school influenced students to take other courses. In speaking with other band directors it is apparent that they, too, thought they knew why students do not remain in music. After listening to the students however, we realise that our assumptions have little in common with theirs.

‘Narratives ... arise out of a desire to have life display coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure’ (Becker 1997, 12). Life rarely unfolds in a structured, ordered way. The story that we presented suggests that there is a ‘reason’, or that there are several ‘reasons’ that can be generalised from the conversations that the researcher was privy to. For each student, life experiences may impact their decisions. Without exception, every student used the term ‘geek’ in reference to band students. In addition, they all defined band students as smart, successful, and strong individuals who do not bow to pressure from their peers. Most of them agreed that band students liked music and found it ‘fun’, although there was no consensus on a particular genre of music that was required. Our assumption that the teacher is critical to the success of the programme was mentioned only peripherally in two conversations. Not even prompting caused any deep reflections on the impact of the band director. The students all agreed that, from their perspective, a student who chose not to continue in band was often making a choice to avoid music rather than a choice to take the other option(s).

Our choice to present this work in the form of a script has allowed us to use the voices of the students to tell their own story. Connelly and Clandinin (1988, 24) write, ‘Narrative is the study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future’. By working with and through the voices of these students, we have been able to make meaning of these conversations, just as the voicing of their thoughts helped them to see what has influenced their choices. We wrote the research with an eye to the seven features of arts-based educational inquiry (Barone and Eisner 1997a, 1997b, 74–8); the creation of a virtual reality, the presence of ambiguity, the use of expressive language, the use of contextualised and vernacular language, the promotion of empathy, personal signature of the researcher/writer, and the presence of aesthetic form. John Searle (1992) points out the fact that when a feature is research it does not suggest that it cannot be artistic; the fact that a feature is artistic does not suggest that it cannot be research. Like musicians who are able to bring music meaning to a score, through an arts-based approach to research dissemination we bring understanding to the creation and recreation of our inquiries. Dramatising the data allowed us to capture, in a visceral way, aspects of the complex process teenagers encounter when making decisions about courses in high school (Belliveau 2006).

These findings will have a profound impact on our teaching practice. Knowing more about the decision-making criteria of students when choosing their high school

courses, we will be able to appeal to students on their level. We can speak more knowledgably about the kind of student who takes band and the social consequences of that. For those who already have a strong self-concept, as with Raine in the present story, their choice will be an easier one. For those who worry about being branded a geek, as with Connor, this opens up a teaching opportunity to help them develop skills to avoid making decisions based on peer pressure and instead learn to trust their own instincts and, to quote one of the focus group participants, 'follow their hearts'.

Sharing the narrative with colleagues is an important step in the inquiry and learning process (Richert 2002). As we share these findings with interested band directors, we expect that high school teachers will be more interested in liaising on a constant basis with elementary schools, developing models of massed bands of feeder schools meeting at the high school, concerts to showcase high school band opportunities, and information sessions where beginning students can ask experienced students candid questions about the programmes.

To extend the impact of these findings, it would be useful to track the academic successes of band students as compared with non-music students at high school and use this information to encourage parents and students to opt for band programmes (Gouzouasis, Guhn and Kishor 2007). A further study could look at those high school programmes that have particularly high retention rates and interview students in those programmes to discover the elements that make those programmes popular. Sharing some of these ideas with other band directors could help them build music departments that elementary school students aspire to belong to, rather than programmes that they have not heard of or do not care about.

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