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The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of one rural middle school band program in North Carolina during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research questions for this study were: (a) How do rural middle school band program stakeholders in North Carolina describe challenges in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic? (b) How do rural middle school band program stakeholders in North Carolina describe benefits in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic? Semi-structured interviews, documentation and archival data, and researcher field notes were utilized as data. Triangulation ensured credibility between and among data types. Data were viewed and presented through a pragmatic lens. Emergent themes included *Adapting Instructional Approaches*, *Allocating Resources, and Social-Emotional* (SE) *and Mental Health* (MH) *Responses*. Results were consistent with previous research related to pre-COVID norms in rural areas such as funding, recruiting/retention, transportation, SE and MH responses, and rurality in general. Recommendations for practice included using the case school band program processes during Emergency Virtual Instruction and Plan B periods as best practice. SE and MH resources are needed in rural middle school band programs in NC. Recommendations for future research included SE and MH research, virtual instruction best practice, and multiple case study and phenomenological inquiry of rural middle school bands in NC as related to COVID-19.

Keywords: Rural, COVID-19, North Carolina, case study, emergency virtual instruction, social emotional, mental health, middle school band

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ONE RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL BAND IN NORTH CAROLINA

by

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Two thirty-somethings return to their work in a room at the Easternmost end of a middle school campus in the summer of 2019. One of them is sweating heavily from the summer heat in rural North Carolina, and the other glistens lightly from the effort. The ranks of four others are just joining them for the second day in a row; a mother who happens to be an educator in the same school and three of her four children, two of whom are band students in this rural middle school. Friendly greetings and hugs are exchanged. The smell of mold, mildew, and instrument lubricant creates an intense, familiar, and not altogether repugnant smell. The walls appear yellowed from age, leaks, and bug skeleton leftovers. A large open-bed truck is parked directly behind the Band Hall with studs, plywood, and carpet scraps lying in a disheveled heap in the back.

We have already dismantled built-in risers from 1980 when the oldest building in the school was renovated to create a wing for elective classes, including band, chorus, agriculture, STEM, and physical education. The now-bare walls and floor reflect the lime green color of Lindsey's shirt, the only sign of vibrance in an otherwise institutional scene. Lindsey, my wife, has always been a massive supporter of the school programs I teach. She is the first to volunteer to help whatever worthy cause presents itself. We work through an almost eight-hour day and have a lot more work to complete. It takes three days to demolish the existing risers and remove all the old carpet with the help of another teacher, five band students, and three dedicated band parents.

Tomorrow the carpet that Lowes contributed at cost will be installed by a professional flooring team from the community who donated their time and materials. In addition, a joint effort with the art teacher has produced two massive panels of a mural project designed to take several semesters to complete. Only six more panels to go before the back wall of the Band Hall is representative of the community, the efforts made by all stakeholders, and the love we all share for the music we create in this space.

When my wife and I went to talk with my principal earlier in the school year regarding making necessary changes to the band room, we did so because the program had grown beyond the existing setup possibilities provided by a room almost half covered in the bulky risers described above. It was my second year in the school with the same principal, and student numbers grew from an initial 20 students in the sixth-grade band to over 70 students. Changing our setup to an arc formation on the room's diagonal provided many safer options than the stadium-style built-in risers that protruded over halfway through the room. We knew there was no way the district could fund the renovation project, as rural schools typically have less funding due to the property tax model.

Our project was the result of necessity, a situation with which many rural middle school band programs may be familiar. We needed the ability to turn the rehearsal space diagonally to make the rehearsal space safe and effective. Each grade level, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, received two elective periods within the master schedule. Because I was teaching band and chorus, I had only one class period to devote to our beginner band. With 70 students taking sixth-grade beginner band that year, space became a significant challenge. The built-in risers in the band room only allowed setup in a way that was not conducive to accommodating 70 chairs, stands, percussion instruments, and other items needed for rehearsals and performances.

Less than a year after we completed our renovation project, COVID-19 took hold. In March of 2020, the once-full room sat silent. One lonely desk facing the dry-erase board held a laptop, a small electronic musical keyboard, one chair, one music stand. The discordant sounds of missed key signatures, poor embouchure setups, and damaged reeds no longer echoed down that Easternmost hallway in that rural middle school in North Carolina. Instead, a deafening silence had taken hold of the now aesthetically pleasing space. Students would receive instruction virtually over the next two years, either synchronously or asynchronously. With Emergency Virtual Instruction (EVI), teachers of all disciplines were thrust into a completely new environment. Alternative methods such as televised lessons, radio broadcast lessons, distributed print materials, Google Classroom, Audacity, and private tutoring options were used in various locations around the world (Jimola & Ofudu, 2021).

Schools around the world averaged 22 weeks of complete or partial closure (Reimers, 2022). Many school districts in the United States attempted to continue with in-person instruction if possible. Other districts mandated online instruction, and others still, a hybrid model of the two. Kraft et al. (2021) surveyed teacher perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on education in the United States:

> Teachers reported challenges related to engaging students in remote learning and balancing their professional and personal responsibilities. Teachers in high-poverty and majority-Black schools perceived these challenges to be the most severe, suggesting the pandemic further increased existing educational inequities. (p. 1)

Sometimes a month or more passed between interactions with the same student, and it was difficult to enlist parent assistance. School administrators scrambled to identify a path

forward. No matter which educational model states or districts chose for their students, public approval was lacking.

In many areas of the United States, the arts were labeled as insignificant or not significant enough to continue teaching during the pandemic (Timon, 2021). Some schools either lost funding for their music programs, or re-evaluated their priorities (Kelly, 2021). Sometimes states and school districts elected to lay off educators, including music educators (Burnette, 2020). Several programs, once considered thriving, were all but eliminated over two years (Garcia, 2023; Kelly, 2021).

In music programs that continued, instrumental music students and teachers lost the ability to rehearse and perform together in person, which was a staple of traditional instrumental music performance. While some educators embraced the challenge of teaching music ensembles virtually and found positive ways to amend or adjust previously utilized instructional methodologies, many found themselves struggling to adapt to technological methodologies and platforms to keep some semblance of traditional performance ensembles (Mauldwin, 2023).

There was, however, a precedent for virtual ensemble work well before COVID-19. In 2010, composer Eric Whitacre conducted and compiled virtual submissions of choral recordings into a virtual performance of his *Lux Aurumque* (ericwhitacre.com, 2022). Unfortunately, however, most ensemble leaders at the secondary music education level, specifically middle school educators, did not have access to the training, and editing software and computer processing power required to complete such a virtual ensemble performance. Additionally, middle and high school students recording and submitting videos to their music teachers was very different than professional performers and university students recording and submitting.

Time was also a factor in whether teachers attempted to utilize virtual performances as an option for their performing ensembles, as a single tune or performance may take up to 50 hours to effectively produce (Earnhardt, 2021). Cayari (2021) provided an 8-step process for creating virtual ensembles. By the time Cayari (2021) reached publication, students had either already returned to a hybrid model of instruction in most parts of the United States or were soon to return to a hybrid model.

Rural Music Programs

Rural school music programs experience a unique mix of challenges and benefits. Due to budgetary constraints or asset shortages related to property taxes, poverty, and lower standardized test scores within rural school districts, rural music programs often go without newer instruments, newer facilities, accessories, and even certified music educators (Teachers College, Columbia University, 2021). Other familiar challenges for rural music programs included poor teacher retention rates due to various factors including professional isolation, the likelihood of serving in numerous schools, a shortage of qualified applicants, and geographic distance concerns (Donovan & Brown, 2021).

Despite the challenges, there are also many redeeming qualities to being a rural music teacher. Rural communities are often close-knit overall (McShane & Smarick, 2018). Rural schools with a strong community presence tend to have good relationships within and among stakeholder groups (Tieken, 2014). Teachers and administrators may be better known throughout the community and overlap between personal and professional lives may be more frequent in small, rural towns and communities. Something as simple as a holiday parade or a Veterans Day celebration may be reliant upon the school, and more specifically, the school music program, to

provide the necessary support for a successful event. A reciprocal bond may be established between the school music program(s) and the community.

Unique challenges are present in rural education in the United States; however, the uniqueness of rurality also provides some benefits for stakeholders. While Bates (2011, 2012) identified numerous challenges faced by rural music students, he also summed up his appreciation for rural middle school band programs:

> I was keenly interested in a recent Facebook post from a successful rural band director and friend: 'There is something special about a kid with a mullet, cowboy boots, and dirty pants nailing Lightly Row on his clarinet'—a post that quickly garnered encouraging comments, as well as 82 'likes…'(2012, p. 213).

As the vignette revealed, connection between community and school in rural areas can be strong. The community responded when we publicly presented the need for a renovation to our band room. Lowes Home Improvement provided the carpeting at cost; the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) contributed the funds. Volunteers provided the labor and materials for painting, and a private flooring contractor donated the labor and supplies to reinstall the new carpet. Scenarios like this one are common in rural schools. Smaller student populations, community ties between teacher and student families, and cultural connections between community members may provide a more stable social-emotional (SE) foundation in rural schools than in suburban or urban areas. Teachers may know their students much better if they have lived and worked in a rural school district over more extended periods of time or their entire lives. Rural school music programs are a key part of community life in rural areas.

I was interested in investigating the impact COVID-19 had on rural middle school band programs in North Carolina. In this study, I explored the cultural, political, and social

environments surrounding the lived experiences of middle school band program stakeholders from one rural North Carolina school during the COVID-19 pandemic. I used a pragmatic lens to consider if the challenges posed by COVID-19 may have created a uniquely trying time for stakeholders within a rural middle school band program in North Carolina.

Background on COVID-19

Wuhan, China, reported an outbreak of a virus known as COVID-19 in the winter of 2019, and the virus rapidly spread across the entire world. The U.S. logged its first two cases on January 20, 2020. By March 30, 2020, there were almost 200,000 confirmed cases in the United States; by November 9, 2020, there were over one million cases (World Health Organization, 2022). The U.S. alone had more than 5.5 million cases by January 10, 2022 (World Health Organization, 2022). Death rates worldwide ranged from 0.2 % to 18.1% by location (World Health Organization, 2022).

As of December 2022, COVID-19 had claimed over 6.5 million lives worldwide, with more than one million of those fatalities in the United States. Cumulative case counts were more than 651 million worldwide (World Health Organization, 2022). While these numbers reported by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) are staggering, they do not show the ebb and flow of each virus strain. Of the three major strains identified as Alpha, Delta, and Omicron strains of the virus and their sub-mutations, the Delta variant was the most lethal. DeWitt et al. (2023) specified that the Delta and Omicron strains varied in their symptom durations and severity, and that the Delta strain was more likely to result in the need for hospitalization. The Omicron variant was by far the most contagious (CDC, 2022). Among the factors affecting the spread of COVID-19 were population density, personal health history, local safety protocols, the transmissibility of each strain of COVID-19, and personal health history.

Rural areas are less dense in population than suburban or urban areas. Therefore, one might imagine a sparsely populated place would be less prone to infections due to the distance between neighbors in rural areas (Tarwater & Martin, 2001). In January 2023, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) denoted all but four counties in North Carolina were labeled as "high risk" concerning COVID-19 transmissibility (CDC, 2022). The four counties listed as "moderate risk", or "low risk" were all counties identified as rural by the North Carolina Rural Center (2014).

Communities interpreted "mandate" differently when enacting safety measures around COVID-19 transmission. Mask mandate enforcement levels differed depending upon location (Lyu & Wehby, 2020; Zhang & Warner, 2020). Enforcement of safety protocols including stay-at-home orders, travel restrictions, social distancing, and masking varied locally within the U.S. (Zhang & Warner, 2020). Local politics, religious views, and individual medical needs, among other factors may have influenced these differences in enforcement (Tisdell, 2020). Individual communities differed in their respective health-related responses to COVID-19. It would logically be expected that a rural place following strict lockdown, masking, and personal hygiene protocols should be considered safer than an urban place following identical procedures. However, the collective population's overall health may have impacted the total infection rate. For example, if rural communities had higher morbidly obese populations, they may have been more prone to infection than urban populations with lower morbid obesity rates.

COVID-19 and Education

COVID-19 forced a shift in public education away from in-person classroom instruction and toward EVI and asynchronous learning conditions worldwide. Music, theater, and dance performances worldwide were canceled around the same time as schools shut down in-person

instruction (Baker, 2020). Even outdoor concerts were canceled in many parts of the world. Reimers (2022) suggested that studying educational entities and processes as they existed during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> … provides a rare opportunity to help us understand how education institutions relate to other institutions and to their external environment under conditions of rapid change. Much of what we know about the relationship of schools to their external environment is based on research carried out in much more stable contexts, where it is difficult to discern what is a cause and what is an effect. (p. 5)

Rural Communities and Schools

Rural places are different from suburban and urban places. Unique community values, political beliefs, religious preferences and beliefs, utility infrastructure, and social differences within the demography of rural counties provide a kaleidoscope of potential definitions of the term "rural." Causby (2019), McShane and Smarick (2018), Fulkerson and Thomas (2016) and other sources each provided definitions of the term. Rurality can be determined by a community's proximity to major educational centers, a lifestyle summary, an identification of Gross Domestic Product based upon mining and farming, or a spatial-demographic view. For this study, I have chosen a spatial-demographic representation of rurality. I will use the North Carolina Rural Center (2014) definition indicating the designation of "rural" as counties in North Carolina with an average population of fewer than 250 people per square mile.

Rurality may be described by its antithesis, urbanormativity, a set of assumptions held by urban populations about rurality and its purpose and function within society (Fulkerson and Thomas, 2016; Prest, 2016). Urbanormativity precludes the idea of place-based education because it explicitly ignores that rurality is part of reality, is desirable as a way of life, and that

rural communities may not wish to be bound by the same political, economic, sociological, and philosophical ideologies as their urban counterparts. Social and media depictions of ignorant or backwoods people reinforce urbanormative ideology (Prest, 2016). Understanding rural communities provides an opportunity to combat urbanormative assumptions from people who do not live or work in rural areas.

Historically, rural schools in the United States have served their communities as sources of literacy and future economic growth (Teiken, 2014). They depended on farming schedules and often retained local funding as a primary revenue source. With local funding also came local control. Local funding remains the primary revenue source for public schools in North Carolina, but as urbanization occurred across America, local control was ceded to or acquired by state and federal levels of jurisdiction. (Teiken, 2014).

Rural Schools at a Glance (RSAAG) (2017), a publication of the United States Department of Agriculture, provided statistics on rural schools compared to urban schools. Data included comparison data between sexes, age brackets, diplomas, and degree attainment. Within rural areas as identified by RSAAG, a subset of data were included; a designation of counties within the United States as "low education rural counties." In low education rural counties, the child poverty rate was 34% as of 2015. All other rural counties in the United States have an average 23% child poverty rate.

Many rural schools were also identified as Title I schools and were provided additional resources from the federal government to fund more equitable educational opportunities for all students. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (2017) suggested rural students were behind their urban peers in college degree attainment by fourteen percentage points despite being ahead of urban counterparts in high school diploma achievement by ten percentage points as of 2015.

Students in rural schools have yet to catch those from suburban schools regarding standardized test scores or funding.

Seventy percent of North Carolina counties have been identified as rural due to their respective populations and area in square miles (North Carolina Rural Center, 2014). As public-school districts in North Carolina were most often organized by county, schools within each respective rural county may also, therefore, have been considered rural. Standardized test results tended to be lower in rural areas of North Carolina. Data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) (2021,2022) revealed proficiency percentages in both Reading and Math End-of-Grade (EOG) tests showed a moderately negative correlation between poverty rate and EOG scores. The higher a county's poverty rate, the lower their EOG test scores were likely to be.

Need for the Study

COVID-19 introduced several significant challenges worldwide. From over 6,000,000 deaths (WHO, 2022) to civic, cultural, educational, and political paradigm shifts, the world adjusted to a new sense of normal. Schools experienced a dramatic shift in educational delivery models, and music programs were some of the most affected subjects in school. Bates (2011), Causby (2019), Fitzpatrick (2013), and VanDeusen (2016) suggested that location labels such as "rural," "suburban," and "urban" matter regarding specific challenges faced by stakeholders in each respective school classification. If rural schools had needs that were different from their urban and suburban counterparts, then COVID-19 may have impacted rural middle schools and their band programs differently than it did those in urban and suburban schools in North Carolina. Furthermore, this study adds to a growing body of literature on rural school music.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of one rural middle school band program in North Carolina during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research questions for this study were:

1. How do rural middle school band program stakeholders in North Carolina describe challenges in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do rural middle school band program stakeholders in North Carolina describe benefits in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic?

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the recency of the research topic presented in this study, I included scholarly articles, news reports, and editorial sources in the literature review. This section was divided into *Rural Schools and Communities in the United States, Rural Schools and Communities in North Carolina, Impact of COVID-19 on Education, Impact of COVID-19 on Education in the United States, Impact of COVID-19 on Education in North Carolina, Impact of COVID-19 on Music Performance Education, Pre-COVID Music Programs in Rural Areas, and Rural Band Programs in North Carolina.*

Rural Schools and Communities in the United States

Attempting to define the term rural has been "one of the fundamental challenges of studying rural schools" (McShane & Smarick, 2018, p. 3). A combination of factors, including media coverage, cinematic and television portrayals, and even romantic notions of simplicity and farm-related lifestyles have made an exact definition difficult (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016). McShane and Smarick (2018) stated that due to a lack of a clear definition of what rural is, one might define rurality as a set of cultural commonalities: being relatively small and close-knit; a large portion of the community are landowners and/or farmers, miners, or drillers; and an absence of major civic and cultural institutions in close proximity. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2022) provided definitions of rural based on proximity to an urbanized area.

Due to a lack of a clear definition of what rural is, and a combination of local socio-political, demographic, religious, and historical factors, rural communities are heterogenous in their appearance and structure. The variety of rural community types might include ranching

communities in Wyoming and Colorado; cropping communities in Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Georgia; and commercial fishing communities along the coasts of the United States.

Bates (2011, 2012, 2017, 2018) wrote about the challenges faced by rural schools in the United States, an underserved population that has, until the last fifty years, not received much attention from researchers. Rural schools frequently fall below Federal and State standards in many facets of education. Public Schools First N.C. (2021) described rural schools as having similar but more pronounced challenges to urban schools with teacher retention problems exacerbated by geographically distant support networks. Logan and Burdick-Will (2017) advocated for continued consideration of rural school voices in the discussion of equity between schools, and that rural schools may face unique challenges such as teacher recruitment and the ability to offer the same types of classes as schools in non-rural areas.

Transportation costs plagued rural schools due to the distance between rural residences (Public Schools First NC, 2021). Harper (2019) cited higher per-student transportation costs associated with busing students over longer distances as a specific challenge faced by rural schools. Additional expenses in transportation may detract from overall per-student funding one might expect to be spent elsewhere within each respective school budget. As greater distances must be traveled to bus students in rural areas, so, too, must more time be spent in transit by the students being bused, and more hourly wages paid to drivers.

SE and Mental Health (MH) challenges are also more prevalent in rural areas than in suburban or urban areas. The American Psychiatric Association (2021) identified three major barriers to rural MH: (a) availability, (b) accessibility, and (c) acceptability. A positive correlation exists between rural locations and both the number and severity of MH crises.

Suicide rates were almost doubled in rural areas as compared to urban areas (Fontanella et. al, 2015) and the rates were potentially due to both illicit drug availability as well as the pervasive availability of firearms. Suicides by firearms and hanging/suffocation were higher in rural areas (Fontanella et. al, 2015). Rural America has 20% fewer providers than other spatial-demographic locations (Mental Health America, 2023). Social stigma and discrimination were also barriers to rural populations seeking MH treatment (Morales et al., 2020).

School funding has been especially challenging in rural areas where residents find themselves at or below the poverty level. Public school funding has been accomplished from three primary contributors: 45% of school funding from local property taxes, 45% from State contributions, and the final 10% from the federal government (Turner et al., 2016). If the tax rate of a county with a population of 18 thousand is 0.60 percent, and a county with a population of 1.115 million is taxed at 0.99 percent, the result is a substantial difference in local funding. Another scenario might include two counties with identical tax rates with large population differences. Taxes collected in the county with the smaller population would be significantly lower. A third scenario could exist in which a county with a smaller population may be taxed at a higher rate than a county with a larger population, and still generate less local funding than the county with the larger population. McCracken and Miller (1988) stated:

> Financial support for the rural school is dependent upon an agricultural tax base. Erosion of that tax base has resulted in rural teachers beginning to question the continued support for education in rural communities. Support for schools should not primarily depend upon the real estate tax base within school district boundaries. (p.26)

Because wages in rural areas were lower, many rural residents find themselves at or below the poverty level of $20,578.00 nationally for a family comprised of two adults and one

child (Economic Research Service, 2023a). For a family of two adults and three children, the poverty line is $30,510. The Economic Research Service (ERS) identified non-metro areas of Southern states had the highest poverty levels of 19.7% (2023a). ERS also showed demography of the highest poverty levels as being experienced by Black, Native American, and Hispanic persons in non-metro areas. Single female households with children fell below the poverty line in non-metro areas at a rate of 46.2%. The residents of rural areas frequently fell on the lower end of socio-economic status (SES) and may struggle with food insecurity (Educational Research Service, 1998) and educational inequality (Albert, 2006). Rural challenges need not have caused a panicked sense of emergency, but a sense of urgency may be warranted related to certain rural challenges (Prest, 2016).

In an effort find ways to facilitate educational opportunities leading to success for all students, specifically students from low-income families, the United States government provided opportunities for schools in low SES areas to apply for additional funds. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) identified many rural schools as Title I schools and described additional resources provided by the federal government to change their financial situations (2019). The hope with Title I funding was that schools may award them as individual student funds or whole school funds. Some examples of individual student funds may have included free or reduced lunch for an individual student. Whole school funds could, for example, be used to provide free lunch for the entire student population.

Title I funds were and continue to be awarded in four separate grant types based on a "complex series of algorithms" in which three school district characteristics are weighed: locale, poverty quarter, and population size (NCES, 2019). The four grant types offered by Title I

include: Basic Grants, Concentration Grants, Targeted Grants, and Education Finance Incentive Grants (NCES, 2019).

> Basic Grants are the largest component of Title I funding ($6.4 billion in fiscal year 2015 [FY 15]). Concentration Grants, the smallest of the four grants ($1.3 billion in FY 15), are available to districts in which the number of formula-eligible children exceeds 6,500 or 15 percent of the district's 5- to 17-year-old population. Targeted Grants ($3.3 billion in FY 15) are allocated to districts according to a student weighting system benefiting districts with high numbers or percentages of formula-eligible children. Education Finance Incentive Grants (EFIG) ($3.3 billion in FY 15) are allocated to states to provide districts with additional funding for low-income and disadvantaged children; the exact amount varies depending on measures of state effort and equity in funding public education. (NCES, 2019)

The highest Title I allocations per student were in large city and remote rural locales in schools that host students in the highest poverty quarter and in schools with student populations below 300 and above 25,000 (NCES, 2019). Despite the Title I funds pumped into rural schools, students have yet to catch suburban schools regarding standardized test scores or per-student funding (Strange, 2011). Additional federal funding has been available through Title II funds, Title III funds, Title IV funds, and Title V funds. Title II funds have been available to LEAs for the purpose of "Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High-Quality Teacher, Principals, or Other School Leaders," while Title III funds have been reserved for "Language Instruction for English Learners and Immigrant Students" (OESA, 2023).

Title IV funds were also available to State Education Agencies (SEA) or Local Education Agency (LEA) use for the following purposes: (a) activities that supported well-rounded

education (WRE), (b) activities that supported safe and healthy students (SHS), and (c) activities that supported effective use of technology (EUT) (OESE, 2020). Over a three-year period spanning 2017-2019, Title IV funds were utilized by forty-seven of our fifty states in the United States, with 82% of LEAs receiving Title IV funding in 2018.

The funding category, activities supporting WRE, included funding for many of what were considered electives/specials classes in elementary and secondary public education in the United States: music and arts, foreign languages, and Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics. Activities to support SHS included funding for SE, behavioral, and MH concerns. Activities funded by the EUT category included educator professional development, technology infrastructure, and provided expanded access to rural area students through the use of technology.

Additional funding and special circumstantial guidelines were also available to rural schools and LEAs through Part B of Title V funding (OESE, 2023b). Through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), LEAs may have been awarded federal funds through SEAs for two separate initiatives: (a) the Small, Rural School Achievement (SRSA) program, and (b) the Rural and Low-Income School (RLIS) program. The SRSA also provides additional flexibility with the spending of federal funds through Alternative Fund Use Authority (AFUA) to schools who qualify for SRSA even if the school's parent LEA does not apply for funding through SRSA. AFUA provides REAP fund recipients the ability to use funds for the following purposes: (a) improving basic programs operated by LEAs, (b) supporting effective instruction, (c) language instruction for English learners and immigrant students, (d) student support and academic enrichment, and (e) twenty-

first century community learning centers. Each of the five categories listed above was associated with funding from Title I, Title II, Title III, or Title IV.

While challenges are numerous in rural schools, social issues such as racial tensions, bullying, and charity may receive additional opportunities for healing in rural communities because of the familial relationships and stakeholder interdependence (Tieken, 2014). Because the state of rural communities requires stakeholders to interact and exist in a codependent state, relationships are likely to be more stable. If a farmer needs feed for livestock, there is likely only one or two locations from which the farmer may purchase within the community. Therefore, the magnitude of importance of the farmer's relationships with the feed store owners may be greater than relationships between patrons and vendors in more heavily populated areas.

Summary

Challenges were identified within rural schools and communities in the United States. Definitions of the term, "rurality" or "rural," differed by source. In addition to differences in definitions of these terms, differences existed between rural communities' appearances. These differences made rurality difficult to study. Challenges common to many rural areas in North Carolina included recruiting and retention of highly-qualified educators, prohibitive transportation costs due to distances between residences and schools, and social emotional and mental health challenges at higher rates and severity than in non-rural areas. In an effort to mitigate funding challenges, the federal government provided additional funding options to schools in rural areas through Title I, Title II, Title III, Title IV, and Title V initiatives including REAP, SRSA, RLIS, and AFUA.

Rural Schools and Communities in North Carolina

Rural North Carolina has faced unique challenges. Causby (2019) stated, "It is important to note that rural areas of North Carolina may differ from rural areas of other states because what fuels the economy may be different, the population diversity may differ, or school systems could be structured differently" (p. 20). In addition to Causby's (2019) stated differences, social elements within each rural community may be unique to each rural area, and attributed to religious beliefs, politics, individual household values and philosophies, and/or community needs. Individuals in North Carolina tend to vote Republican (Politico.com, 2021) and hold conservative Christian views (Pew Research Center, 2022). Community issues in rural areas include high rates of illicit drug abuse (Ostrach et al., 2021), high poverty levels, and rampant racial tensions (Curtis, 2022; Fofaria, 2022; Hui, 2022; Nagem, 2022).

As of 2021, North Carolina boasted a median household income of $66,185 over the five-year period between 2018 and 2022 (Economic Research Service, 2023c). At the county level, however, household income may have fluctuated drastically. For example, only six of the seventy counties in North Carolina identified by the North Carolina Rural Center (2014) as "rural" met or exceeded the 2020 North Carolina State median household income (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024).

Camden, Chatham, Currituck, Dare, Moore, and Pender Counties met or exceeded the median household income for North Carolina. The six counties listed comprised an approximate 9% of rural counties in North Carolina and relied on tourism and commerce to fund the most of their GDP. By contrast, the remaining 91% of North Carolina rural counties are predominantly dependent upon agriculture and some manufacturing in North Carolina (Economic Research Service, 2023c).

Despite the availability of trade work and farming opportunities, wages in North Carolina may be well below a "living wage" based upon a 12.8% poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Trade work also typically requires some sort of technical education, an opportunity which may not be perceived as available to the rural workforce. While farming opportunities have been available, they do not necessarily equate to livable wages.

As rural areas tend to have higher populations of children from low-income homes, rural schools must navigate additional challenges as related to each child:

> Children from low-income homes are more likely to experience food, housing, and energy insecurity. They are more likely to suffer from poor nutrition and inadequate healthcare. When they do become ill, it takes longer for them to recover. In North Carolina, nearly one in six of rural students live below the poverty line, and one in nine has changed residence in the previous 12 months. They are less likely to have adequate resources at home, and they have less access to enriching activities outside of school. These children enter school with a readiness gap that grows as they get older. Additionally, students living in poverty are more likely to drop out of college or never attend college. (Public Schools First NC, 2021, p. 3)

The readiness gap shown by Public Schools First NC (2021) may be seen in standardized test score results. Test results tended to be lower in rural areas on both math and reading assessments than in suburban areas and urban areas (NCDPI, 2021). However, percentages of schools identified as "low performing" are higher in urban counties in North Carolina than in suburban or rural counties in North Carolina (NCDPI, 2021).

Student transportation in North Carolina public schools was drastically different between cities and rural areas. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Transportation

Division (NCDPITD) reported that city students average a 15-minute bus ride and rural area students average a 50-minute ride (2021).

Public health has been different in rural areas as well. “In rural areas rates of diabetes, opioid use and overdose deaths, and heart disease are higher compared to other areas of the state” (Public Schools First NC, 2021). Ostrach et al. (2021) highlighted several cultural challenges rural North Carolinians face. The authors explicitly cited higher rates of drug use, specifically methamphetamines, and overdoses in the Southern United States in rural and mountain regions. Mental Health America (2023) cited a lack of local MH practitioners in rural areas, a social stigma related to MH, and a lack of adequate MH insurance coverage for rural residents.

The North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation (NCSBI) reported crime rates for each county (2022). The average crime rate per 100,000 people in 2021 for counties designated as rural by the North Carolina Rural Center (2014) definition was 2032.7, suburban counties at a close 2265.9, and urban counties at 3276.8. One rural county outlier, Graham County, registered a staggering 7698.5 – over three times the mean statistic of all rural counties. Two additional rural outliers, Richmond, and Robeson Counties, were identified at over 5100/100,000. Anson, Camden, Caswell, Gates, Perquimans, Transylvania, Tyrrell, and Yancey Counties all registered under 1000/100,000 people. These statistics included both violent and non-violent crimes.

Just as rural schools face unique benefits and challenges, so, too, do educators in rural schools. Burton et al. (2013) cited four emergent themes through their narrative literature analysis of rural teachers in the United States: (a) rural teachers were professionally isolated, (b) rural teachers were different from urban and suburban teachers, (c) rural teachers were often

lacking in professional knowledge/teaching credentials, and (d) rural teachers were particularly resistant to change.

Summary

Rural schools and communities and the stakeholders within them must overcome numerous obstacles within their respective communities including (a) chronic drug use and abuse rates, (b) high poverty rates, (c) lower standardized test scores than urban and suburban schools, (d) funding challenges, (e) higher rates and greater magnitude of SE and MH challenges than urban or suburban areas, (f) food insecurity among children, and (g) educator recruiting challenges. Despite the many challenges faced by rural schools, specifically those in North Carolina, the charms of small-town life and the relationships developed between and among stakeholder groups provide opportunities for a different lifestyle than those experienced by people in suburban and urban areas.

Impact of COVID-19 on Education

COVID-19 changed education all over the world. School closures, mask mandates, limited in-person interaction between students and trusted educators, and cancellations or postponements of culturally relevant social opportunities created challenges that have not been experienced on a global level since the Spanish Flu (Tisdell, 2020). Several recent studies revealed COVID-19 related challenges within educational systems in Ukraine (Bondarenko et al., 2023), Spain (Calderón-Garrido & Gustems-Carnicer, 2021), China (Cheng & Lam, 2021; Guo, 2021), Germany (Rosset et al., 2021), and England (Sherwood, H., 2020). Overarching themes included the need for mental and emotional health for students and teachers (Joseph & Lennox, 2021) and unpreparedness for EVI (Bondarenko et al. 2023). Educators were tasked with utilizing new instructional delivery methods (Guo & Li, 2020).

In addition to similarities between locations around the world, stark contrasts were noted by Soudien et al. (2022) in their conclusions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the South African educational system when they stated:

> COVID-19 has thus laid bare both the inequalities in provisions needed to continue learning from home—such as funds, digital devices and data, adequate nutrition—as well as the disparity in how well teachers, learners, and parents have been equipped to do so. (p. 320)

In Ukraine, some educators were purportedly dismissed for not receiving the COVID vaccine (Bondarenko et al., 2023). In the same study, 73.2% of respondents stated they had no prior experience teaching distance lessons before the pandemic, and 52.9% of respondents indicated their distance lessons were less effective than in-person instruction. Respondents (57.1%) also shared that distance learning lessons required more time to prepare than in-person lessons.

Guo (2021) called for more attention and resources to be provided for music students in rural China, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cheng and Lam (2021) identified music teachers in Hong Kong as experiencing increased levels of anxiety due to parental expectations, school expectations, and unfamiliarity with virtual teaching platforms.

Rucsanda et al. (2021) shared that EVI in Romania made synchronous performance impossible for instrumental and vocal musicians. Specifically, a lack of technology capable of sustaining live, synchronous performances forced music educators to replace their time-tested and time-honored traditions of using synchronous live performance as a teaching tool during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United Kingdom, Levstek et al. (2021) found young people utilized virtual music making as a SE coping mechanism during school closures.

In Canada, Barbeau et al. (2023) identified challenges experienced by teachers during COVID-19 EVI were (a) more instructional interruptions, (b) less motivation to teach, and (c) 28% of teachers in Canada were either assigned to other tasks or did not teach at all during the first wave of COVID-19. In the Fall semester of 2020, 83% of schools were back to in-person learning, but 17% of schools remained completely virtual or offered a hybrid model of instruction.

Reimers (2022) cited a distinct difference in vaccine availability for based on socio-economic status (SES) worldwide, with wealthier areas having more opportunities to receive the COVID-19 vaccine than less wealthy areas. In the same study, the researcher acknowledged various methods used to deliver instruction during the pandemic including online, television, radio, and paper-based learning. Additionally, Reimers (2022) stated,

> In a nutshell, the pandemic limited student opportunity for interactions with peers and teachers and for individualized attention—decreasing student engagement, participation, and learning—while augmenting the amount of at-home work which, combined with greater responsibilities and disruptions, diminished learning time while increasing stress and anxiety, and for some students, aggravated mental health challenges. The pandemic also increased teacher workload and stress while creating communication and organizational challenges among school staff and between them and parents. (p. 28)

In addition to losing in-person formal learning opportunities, students also lost out on culturally-relevant informal learning opportunities through closures of opera houses, dance theaters, and other venues (Tsioulcas, 2020).

Summary

Global educational response to COVID-19 differed between and among spatial-demographic locations and was partially dependent upon socio-economic, philosophical, political, and other social elements. Culturally relevant in-person celebrations and SE growth opportunities were diminished or eliminated. In some communities, teachers were dismissed if they failed to receive the COVID vaccine, while in other areas, vaccines were not even available. The disparities between communities further highlighted a lack of equity and educational agency preparedness for EVI. Questions of how to provide for students who suffered from food insecurity and other basic needs questions prevailed. Stakeholders in every facet of education experienced additional stressors. Educators learned new ways of delivering instruction, but also had to contend with a lack of internet access for them or their students in many locations. Educators also revealed a lack of motivation to teach and increased MH concerns. Additional distractions for stakeholders were also noted by educators during EVI. Music educators had to learn new ways to provide music performance instruction.

Impact of COVID-19 on Education in the United States

The United States' reaction to COVID-19 was similar to other parts of the world. Mask mandates were implemented across the country in the early stages of the virus's arrival. Federal government officials implemented emergency shutdowns of all commerce and activities deemed "non-essential." Although the Federal government provided guidelines through the CDC and the WHO, individual states and local governments had leeway for dealing with the pandemic in whatever way seemed best for each respective location. This leeway resulted in drastic differences in the use of preventive methodologies and potentially impacted the spread of COVID-19 among other viruses during a two-year period and beyond (Zhang & Warner, 2020).

EVI, whether synchronous or asynchronous, became the new normal in the United States. Feindler et al. (2021) clearly outlined some of the largest challenges faced by schools in the U.S. in response to EVI: questions of standardized testing accountability; questions raised regarding what should be taught and how it should be taught; and questions of the difference of frequency of instructional interaction within and between individual states; specifically arts education; and that these differences raised additional questions as to the availability of education to students across the United States. Fiscal challenges within some school districts created a perceived need to cut elective courses for secondary educational institutions due to COVID-19 (Hirt, 2020; Leguarda, 2023).

Tisdell (2020) wondered about the "economic and social costs of locking down schools and educational institutions" (p. 27). Many sports were shut down during the school closures in the United States, leaving high school hopefuls for sports scholarships and Spring scouting missing out. Spring concerts and dance and theater performances were cancelled. Traditionally attended rites of passage such as Spring socials, proms, and cotillions were also cancelled, leaving many students with a significant loss of SE learning opportunities. MH concerns including elevated stress for teachers and students in K-12 education grew more pronounced (Miksza et al., 2022), The researchers in the same study cited the need for additional supports for educators post-COVID-19, as long-term effects of teaching during COVID-19 were not yet identified.

Rural students' education was negatively affected by internet access during the pandemic (Nichols, 2020). There was also a lower likelihood of students owning or having access to digital devices such as laptops or Chromebooks (Nichols, 2020). This exacerbated existing inequitable

educational opportunities for students from low SES homes. Nichols (2020) speculated that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated learning loss for many poor students due to these issues.

Social challenges in the United States, including behaviors driven by socio-political and philosophical belief structures, included vaccine hesitancy and masking refusals. Doherty et al. (2021) identified government mistrust as the primary reason for vaccine hesitancy in the United States among the purposive sample surveyed. Hispanic populations demonstrated higher levels of vaccine hesitancy than Black or White populations. Fear from both the vaccinated and unvaccinated made its way into school closure debates, with the question of individual human rights versus population health as a central discussion (Counts, 2021; Hamilton, 2021; Lenthang, 2021).

MH concerns including elevated stress for teachers and students in K-12 education grew more pronounced (Miksza et al, 2022). The researchers in the same study cited the need for additional supports for educators post-COVID-19, as long-term effects of teaching during COVID-19 were not yet identified.

The United States Government distributed approximately 191 billion dollars in funding for elementary and secondary schools following the emergence of COVID-19. Distributions were encompassed under three Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Acts (Skinner, 2020). Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds are just one example of funds awarded through the CARES Acts, which were used during the COVID-19 pandemic to keep schools and school programs afloat. The first ESSER Fund distributions began in March of 2020. Funds were distributed under fifteen earmarked categories, some of which included (a) Instructional Support, (b) Planning and Implementing Activities Related to Learning Loss, (c) Addressing the Needs of Low-Income Students, (d) Students With Disabilities, and (e)

English Language Learners (Morrison & Neel, 2021). While COVID-19 presented challenges for all schools, it is likely that schools faced with economic challenges pre-COVID-19 would experience further financial challenges during the pandemic unless Federal, State, or local governments contributed additional funding.

Summary

COVID-19 impacted education in the United States in ways similar to other countries. All non-essential activities were suspended, and many physical schoolhouses closed. EVI was utilized as a stop-gap to provide researchers with opportunities to improve and approve COVID vaccines and to minimize the spread of infection. Extracurricular activities such as sports were halted in many locations. Educators had to learn how to navigate emergent online instruction. Rural schools experienced additional challenges of increased isolation and a lack of internet connectivity. State and local governments retained the leeway to make decisions related to Political concerns related to masking and vaccine requirements plagued school board meetings. The federal government provided additional resources through the CARES Acts and provided ESSER fund opportunities for state-run schools to mitigate learning loss during EVI and Plan B instruction.

Impact of COVID-19 on Education in North Carolina

The federal government awarded North Carolina with approximately $3.6 billion in ESSER funds (OESE, 2023a), with $1.4 billion released to North Carolina on March 24, 2021, and the remaining $2.2 billion released to North Carolina on September 13, 2021 (OESE, 2023a). The state government identified two major goals for the use of the distributed ESSER funds as, “Academic recovery in reading and math, and addressing the social-emotional health and well-being of children throughout the state” for a total student enrollment population of

1,513,677 (OESE, 2023a). North Carolina Department of Public Instruction identified some school building projects and child nutrition projects as examples of acceptable use of ESSER funds (2023a).

The COVID-19 response in North Carolina was similar to United States and global responses. Public education shifted to EVI with little to no infrastructure to accommodate it. Many educators had to learn new technologies, digital instruction platforms, computer programs, and applications. Some schools distributed internet hot spots for their students. The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) provided personal protective equipment (PPE), including masks and hand sanitizer, to all public schools at no charge to the schools. Student athletics and opportunities for SE growth and development such as dances, arts performances, and other social gatherings were cancelled. Graduation requirements were amended to allow students graduate despite the implemented school shutdowns and EVI failures (Leslie, 2020b). Students in North Carlina were not required to take EOG or EOC tests in 2020 thanks to a federal waiver requested by the North Carolina State Board of Education (Leslie, 2020a).

Additionally, North Carolina provided flexibility in grading policies for students in grades K-11 in response to COVID-19 and authorized the distribution of 50 million dollars to combat COVID-19-related challenges such as food insecurity in public schools in North Carolina (Childress, 2020). Approximately 571,000 meals were distributed daily thanks to the 50-million-dollar distribution to public schools in North Carolina.

In addition to challenges directly related to the COVID-19 virus, politics and social stigma may have been partially responsible for some of the health-related challenges in North

Carolina. N.C. Health News identified vaccine mistrust, politics, and history as reasons some North Carolinians have refused to get vaccinated (Nagem, 2021).

Physical health was not the only concern for the U.S. population during the COVID-19 pandemic. School-age children were also demonstrating alarming MH concerns. The CDC (2021) identified an increase in the total number of reports of MH concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic in children ages 5-12. Additionally, during the EVI and Plan B periods, students who participated in in-person instruction were less likely to report MH challenges. During 2021, approximately one-fifth of children did not receive the necessary MH treatment (CDC, 2023). Walker (2023) reported that 51.8% of public schools provide mental health assessments, and that rural schools are 19% less likely to provide MH assessments than city schools.

Removing students from full-time, in-person instruction created SE learning opportunity gaps for students during COVID-19. Pre-COVID-19 SE learning opportunities for K-12 students was a required component of public-school education through Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and has received much attention over the last forty years. SE learning consists of teaching behavioral, social, emotional, and MH well-being. Ideal implementation of SE learning within schools was defined by Allbright et al. (2019) as completing six categorical requirements: (a) using strategies to promote positive school relationships, (b) supporting positive behavior, (c) promoting engagement, relationships, and SE learning skills using elective courses and extracurricular activities, (d) SE learning-specific classroom practices and curricula, (e) hiring, organizing, and training personnel, and (f) measurement and data use.

According to Pendharkar (2023), SE learning may be delivered via Multiple Tier System of Supports in which every student universally receives SE growth opportunities, 15% of students receive a tier of targeted intervention strategies from school nurses and counselors, and

5% of students who demonstrate the highest needs receive a third tier of intensive strategies which may require medical, psychological, and behavioral supports from professionals within those fields who are external to the school system. When schools closed in-person instruction, Katzman and Stanton (2020) recognized the need for integrated online SE opportunities during the early portions of COVID-19, stating that effective online SE learning was one of three key components to a successful online education program.

Summary

COVID-19 directly and indirectly influenced education in North Carolina through (a) ESSER fund distributions from the federal government, (b) school closures, (c) masking and social-distancing mandates from government officials, (d) implementation of EVI with little to no functional infrastructure, (e) influence on socio-political debates and activities, (f) full hospitals and other medical treatment facilities, and (f) reduction of SE learning opportunities for students. Additionally, LEAs were provided leeway from the SEA to ensure students could graduate on time, and a reprieve from EOG and EOC testing.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Music Performance Education

Music educators teaching during EVI found that live rehearsals and performances via Zoom or other online meeting platforms were ineffective due to lagging issues among different internet services and the delay associated with sending and receiving electronic communications (Cayari, 2020). Students lost access to instant performance feedback when they were unable to perform (Kelly, 2021). As virtual performances were possible, but time-consuming, often requiring 50 or more hours to prepare a single song or tune (Earnhardt, 2021), many music educators either chose to not have virtual performances or were not able to due to a lack of internet infrastructure (Ascione, 2019), processing power, or knowledge. Shaw and Mayo (2022)

highlighted a lack of standardized curriculum and a lack of pre-made, packet learning materials. They recommended administrative support for professional development for music educators to learn how to navigate new technologies associated with EVI and Plan B instructional requirements (Shaw & Mayo, 2022).

Kelly (2021) surveyed over 100 band director participants about how COVID-19 impacted performance ensembles. When students returned to a hybrid model of instruction, and some rehearsals could take place, music educators in band and orchestra programs were at a recruiting disadvantage, as active recruiting from feeder schools could not be accomplished via virtual means to the same degree of success they might experience during in-person instruction (Kelly, 2021). Recruiting and retention challenges were shared by respondents, 81.9% of whom reported losing members in their ensembles. Parker (2021) highlighted a 60% reduction in one program between 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 for one school program identified as successful pre-pandemic. Kelly (2021) stated 44% of respondents noted their programs suffered financially, and 29.3% of respondents stated their programs were financially devastated due to COVID-19-related challenges. North Carolina was one of 18 states experiencing financial devastation to music programs (Kelly, 2021). Music educators were among teachers laid off in response to COVID-19 driven budgetary concerns (Burnette, 2020).

Hash (2021) described substantially lower rates of band student participation during COVID-19 remote learning in high-poverty and rural areas. Schools with higher rates of consistent or very consistent participation during virtual learning experiences had music educators with at least six years of experience and worked in low-poverty or mid-low poverty schools (Hash, 2021). A majority of respondents (83.3%) identified preparation of band

repertoire as “low priority” or “non-priority” during remote learning, indicating a shift toward other instructional concerns (Hash, 2021).

Other instructional concerns included physical and MH and SE opportunities. Palac (2008) stated one of the roles of music educators in student health was to “diminish the risks of making music for our students” (p. 21) and that music educators should seek to reduce stress in the classroom as one of four major goals related to physical and MH. During the COVID-19 pandemic, school stakeholders experienced significantly higher rates of stress and anxiety, and many students lost out on SE growth opportunities they would have otherwise experienced during in-person learning.

Summary

Music performance education norms were altered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some music educators were laid off. Those who were not laid off could not effectively or efficiently provide performance opportunities to their students due to electronic lag, lack of adequate training in music editing software, and a lack of performance processing software or power. Many music educators opted to not teach music performance as a priority during EVI and Plan B instructional times. Student participation in virtual learning differed by school. Schools with more experienced music educators tended to have better student participation. Students in low- or mid-poverty schools tended to have better student participation in virtual instructional times. Physical needs and SE and MH concerns were prioritized above music instruction delivery in many cases, with SEAs and LEAs seeking to provide maximum SE growth opportunities for their students.

Pre-COVID-19 Music Programs in Rural Areas

Rural music programs in North Carolina may look quite different than their counterparts in urban and suburban music programs. VanDeusen (2016) denoted that schools in rural areas are often cherished and may provide some sense of identity for the community. Teacher turnover every three or four years was one challenge identified in a study of a rural school in the Midwest (VanDeusen, 2016). One interviewee stated that it could be difficult to move into the rural area in which the case school was located because of a lack of options for a significant other and a lack of things to do. Benefits included strong support from administration and staff, and overall community financial support. VanDeusen (2016) identified a "synergy of relationships" as a key factor in the success of the case rural music program and financial investment into a new rehearsal facility for the band (p. 71). The band director's involvement in community activities such as an alumni band served both the case school and the community as a whole.

Isbell (2005) identified ways in which the challenges of teaching music in rural schools may be mitigated. Isbell suggested the need for rural music educators to understand the community (communities) in which they teach, participate in master schedule creation and maintenance, rewrite or arrange music to suit the needs of smaller ensembles, provide travel opportunities for students, combine smaller music performance classes to create larger ensembles, and capitalize on stakeholder support networks including booster organizations and PTA.

Bates (2011) identified benefits and challenges associated with teaching music in rural areas and provided some thoughts on how colleges and universities could better prepare music educators for teaching in rural areas. Reducing the focus on Western music for large ensembles and identifying personal biases concerning students in rural schools were two ways to improve

preparation for music educators who teach in rural music programs. Music educators can mitigate professional isolation associated with teaching in a rural school by understanding the importance of professional support through PLC or other professional associations. Bates suggested teaching music educators to think critically, so they might examine the unique challenges, opportunities, and biases that come with teaching music in rural schools. Finally, the author recommended recruiting music students from rural areas to become music educators (Bates, 2011).

Rural music programs are the victims of cosmopolitanism, a concept similar to urbanormativity (Bates, 2014). According to cosmopolitanism, there is an expectation by urban and suburban groups for rural music programs to work toward being more like urban and suburban music programs (Bates, 2014). Cosmopolitanism comes at the cost of the uniqueness of each community it overtakes. Bates (2021) further demonstrated the divisive concept of cosmopolitanism in his introduction in which he shared an anecdote about being called a "diamond in the rough" due to his shortcomings as a music performer from a rural background. Within Bates (2014) argument against cosmopolitanism, he suggested that music educators can highlight community strengths as a way to combat the divisive construct of cosmopolitanism.

Bates contributions to the field of rural music education research often strayed into areas concerning students from lower SES, highlighted equity disparities between the poor and the wealthy, and demonstrated biases related to rurality in general and rural music education. "Whether recognized or not, socioeconomic stratification relies on a seriously uneven playing field wherein children from relatively lower classes face often insurmountable disadvantages" (Bates, 2021; p. 220).

Summary

Pre-COVID-19 Rural music programs existed as part of a larger community picture, often contributing to a sense of community identity. Funding, teacher turnover, and other professional and personal challenges associated with living and/or working as a music educator in rural areas were cited as normal during pre-COVID-19 times. In addition, some educators in rural areas felt compelled to advocate for music education specific to rural areas in contrast to cosmopolitanism and urbanormativity.

Rural Band Programs in North Carolina

Causby (2019) provided the most recent look into contextual knowledge and specialized skills obtained and retained by instrumental music educators in rural North Carolina, attitudes and belief structures of the same population, and the challenges and rewards experienced by secondary music educators in rural North Carolina. Of the 62 respondents, 70% revealed that more than half of their respective students were eligible for free or reduced lunch programs, and that the socio-economic status of their respective students somewhat reflected the socio-economic status of students within their respective schools and communities. Additionally, Causby attributed respondents' cited parent participation rates of less than 20% to parents working multiple jobs or caring for multiple children.

Causby (2019) identified "Rural Instrumental Music Teacher Skills in Order of Importance" based upon survey responses from rural instrumental music educators (p. 63). Respondents rated the importance of a pre-determined set of music educator skills. They designated the top five most important music educator skills from the pre-determined list: developing relationships with your students, developing respect for students, demonstrating love for your students, strong work ethic, and getting students to buy in to your program.

Causby (2019) investigated the attitudes of secondary instrumental music educators as related to teaching in a rural area. More than half of respondents stated that they took their respective rural secondary instrumental music education jobs because either "they wanted to help people" or that the job they took was "the only one available to them at that time" (p. 68). They revealed moderately high levels of job satisfaction. Respondents also believed that they retained better control over their classrooms than other teachers at their school, and that they maintained very high expectations for their students.

Respondents cited support, funding, and student involvement as the top three challenges for success in a rural instrumental secondary music performance program. The top three rewards of teaching in rural secondary instrumental music programs were "creating/having musical experiences with students, witness students' musical growth, and witness students' personal growth" (Causby, 2019, p. 76).

Causby (2019) identified emergent themes related to public music education in rural North Carolina and listed challenges within rural music as identified by rural music educators in North Carolina: moderate support from administration, limited resources and access to musical instruments, competition for the same small pool of students, facilities and equipment challenges, scheduling challenges (Sussman, 2014), and budgetary challenges. In the same study, the researcher found the mean fundraising budget for rural middle school music programs was $8,330.20 (Causby, 2019)

Summary

Many students in rural North Carolina music programs receive free or reduced lunch. Music educators in rural North Carolina cited high rates of job satisfaction and stated that wanting to help people and job availability were two primary motivators for taking their

respective jobs in rural schools. Challenges cited by respondents in Causby's study included support, funding, and student participation.

Summary

Rural communities and schools in the United States may appear heterogenous yet share similar challenges and rewards for stakeholders living and learning within them. Whether coastal, inland, or remote, rural communities and schools rely on a symbiotic relationship; the community supports the school, and the school provides educational growth for students who will, in time, become productive citizens within the community. The relationships developed among school stakeholders often extend beyond the classroom and into everyday life. Challenges for rural schools include (a) funding, (b) transportation, and (c) educator recruiting/retention, (d) high community poverty levels, (e) food insecurity for students, and (f) a lack of available mental health supports for stakeholders.

Challenges unique to each individual rural community and school include struggles related to socio-economic factors, demography, politics, religion, crime, and historical factors. Benefits commonly found in rural communities and schools include (a) close-knit community affect, (b) strong interpersonal relationships, (c) smaller student population numbers within schools, (d) educator belief structures supporting communities in which they teach.

Rural communities and schools in North Carolina are different from county to county. Differing tax rates and populations negatively impact equity in school funding. In an effort to combat equity challenges within schools, federal funding opportunities under Title I, II, III, IV, and V; REAP; ESEA; SRSA; and RLIS were made available for schools serving students in high-poverty/low-income areas. The median household income in rural counties is below the state average. Many students live in situations where the family income is below the poverty

line. With higher poverty rates, schools were forced to address additional concerns for students including food insecurity, SE and MH challenges, and physical health concerns for students. North Carolina's rural schools also performed below the standards set by NCDPI in reading and math EOG assessments.

Many schools across the globe were closed during most of 2020. COVID-19 exacerbated previously identified equity challenges within public education in the United States. Schools attempted various methods from television broadcasts to packet work, to internet-based instructional delivery. For those in rural areas, the shift to EVI posed challenges due to a lack of dedicated internet infrastructure and devices on which students could work and submit their work. Specific goals for student learning were unclear during the early portion of EVI. Students lost out on valuable SE learning opportunities. Music education via EVI was thoroughly different than what most music educators and students were accustomed to. Stakeholders were forced to learn new technologies and new instructional delivery methods, and music performance classes were unable to rehearse with the frequency or intensity they once were. In some areas, music educators were laid off, music programs were cut, and recruiting/retention suffered. Exploring these experiences may provide important information to the profession.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of one rural middle school band program in North Carolina during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research questions for this study were:

1. How do rural middle school band program stakeholders in North Carolina describe challenges in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do rural middle school band program stakeholders in North Carolina describe benefits in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Researchers utilize qualitative studies to identify, explore, and understand others' meanings of their lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Exploratory case studies help answer questions of how, what, and why focusing on "a contemporary set of events…over which a researcher has little or no control" (Yin, 2018, p. 13). Stake (1995) highlighted exploring struggles because they may help identify the nature of a given case, and manifest and intertwine with "political, historical, social, and especially personal contexts" (p. 17). Exploring the selected case with an interest in struggles or challenges may provide a deeper insight into the case itself. Using an exploratory case study design was appropriate as I was interested in a contemporary event and its impact on a rural middle school band program in North Carolina over which I had no control.

I explored stakeholders lived experiences within the selected case, including challenges and benefits, and policies and procedures. This case may differ from other cases and was, therefore, not generalizable. However, findings may be of interest to those with similar experiences (Stake, 1995).

Bounding a study provides researchers parameters in which to operate effectively by limiting the scope of a study to time, place, and physical boundaries (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). This case study was bound by the selected case school campus of a single rural middle school band program in North Carolina during the COVID-19 pandemic. My research questions bound the study to focus on perceived benefits and challenges reported by stakeholders as related to the case school band program and COVID-19. Data collection occurred over the summer break for the case school county between school years 2022/2023 and 2023/2024.

Case Selection

Case selection was limited to one public middle school band program in a rural county in North Carolina with a band director who had served in their current school from or before school year 2017/2018 through the present. The case selection county was not only appropriate based upon its ruralness but was also advantageous because counties were used in bounding economic, demographic, and socio-political data collection in previous research (Economic Research Service, 2023b). I used convenience sampling, based on several criteria grounded in my experiences teaching and building rural middle school band programs in North Carolina. The band director must have served in their current school site for five or more years and teach only band so that I could obtain data both pre-COVID and post-Plan B. I was interested in band programs with a history of community performances at local events in the two years prior to COVID-19. The band director had seven years of experience in rural middle school bands, had taught at the site school for six years, and taught only band. Furthermore, we had a prior professional and personal relationship.

The case school band program is referred to from this point forward as Excelsior band program, and the case school as Excelsior Middle School, both pseudonyms. The Excelsior band program

had an active Booster program, although the Booster program also covered the schools athletics program.

Data Collection

Data collection was guided by the research questions and awareness of emergent issues within the selected case (Stake, 1995). Multiple types of data are necessary for case study research (Stake, 1995). Data included transcribed interviews of stakeholders in five different categories: administrator, band director, parent, student, and community partner. Other data were documentation and archival records in the form of communications between stakeholders, music performance programs, lesson plans, enrollment numbers, MPA results, EOG results, and notes from school team meetings. I also took memos as related to my experiences interviewing stakeholders and journaled my affective responses to my experiences with data collection and analysis. Interview questions focused on the emergence of COVID-19 in the selected school, how stakeholders experienced the COVID-19 pandemic within the Excelsior band program, and how they have emerged from EVI and Plan B into post-COVID norms. (see Appendix A).

Once Elisabeth (pseudonym), the band director consented, I used snowball sampling to gain participants from each of the four remaining stakeholder categories of administrators, parents, students, and community partners. Elisabeth agreed to send out recruiting emails to other stakeholder groups and individuals containing my recruitment script. Once her emails were sent out to potential interviewees, I reached out only to those who responded to her initial emails. I did not courtesy copy Elisabeth for subsequent communications with potential stakeholder interviewees to protect confidentiality. I required a signed consent or assent form from each participant and required parental consent for stakeholder interviewees under the age of 18. I

attempted to gain a sixth category of stakeholder interviewees who were teachers, but no teachers responded to Elisabeth's email containing my request.

Interviews

Interviews were my primary data source. Case study researchers must seek to portray their respective cases through the eyes of those who have lived the relevant experiences (Stake 1995). Interviews allowed participants to tell and retell their stories from multiple perspectives and realities through which meaning and understanding were derived. Interviewees included two administrators, one band director, two former students, two parents, and one community partner. All interviewees either selected or received pseudonyms. Any identifying information was redacted from the interviews to protect privacy and confidentiality and encourage the most honest responses. Consent and assent forms were completed by each stakeholder interviewee and all data were stored as required by the UNCG Institutional Review Board.

Interviews occurred in a public location selected by the participants, all but one of which occurred at a local library with semi-private rooms suitable for interviewing. Prior to my first interview, I arrived thirty minutes early to a local library, located in a small town, to set up the video recording function on my laptop and set up the interview room with my field notes journal, document binder, and backpack in a manner that would hopefully provide Elisabeth, my first interviewee, with a comfortable setting in which she would feel open in her responses. I repeated this process for each stakeholder interview.

I conducted nine total interviews, with Elisabeth providing two interviews, one at the beginning and one at the end of the study. In between Elisabeth's first and second interviews, I conducted one interview each with Willis, Diana, Joseph, Brian, Andante, Ava, and Duncan. All interview locations included an office-style setting that was sound-dampening or soundproofed

to protect confidentiality and were scheduled in one-hour interview blocks with short breaks. No scheduled interview lasted longer than one hour. Stakeholder interviewees were also offered breaks if they seemed taxed during the interview process. Interviews focused on the emergence of COVID-19 in the selected school, how stakeholders experienced the COVID-19 pandemic within the Excelsior Middle School band, and how they have emerged from EVI, Plan B, and developed post-COVID norms. Interviews were transcribed by Otter.ai, corrected as necessary, and verified by interviewees. The yielded interview data totaled 288 pages of double-spaced, 12-point font.

Documentation and Archival Records

Yin (2018) highlighted the most important use of documentation and archival records as the corroboration and augmentation of other data sources. Documents and archival records provided insight into trends pre- and post-COVID such as enrollment, policies, procedures, stakeholder communication, and decision-making. I utilized documentation and archival records as provided by stakeholders to identify program enrollment numbers both pre-COVID-19 and current. I considered, district and schoolwide letters and other communications between stakeholders specifically referencing COVID-19 or related policies, procedures, and decisions. I also received concert programs and lesson plans from the band director from the last five years of band performances from the selected case program. I identified mean repertoire difficulty levels, number of repertoire pieces, and genres selected by year. As test scores for End of Grade tests are public record, and results from Music Performance Adjudication (MPA) are public record, I researched those data upon identifying the Excelsior band program as the selected case. This data set yielded approximately 208 pages of double-spaced, 12-point font, in addition to charts, graphs, memes, and various other electronic documents.

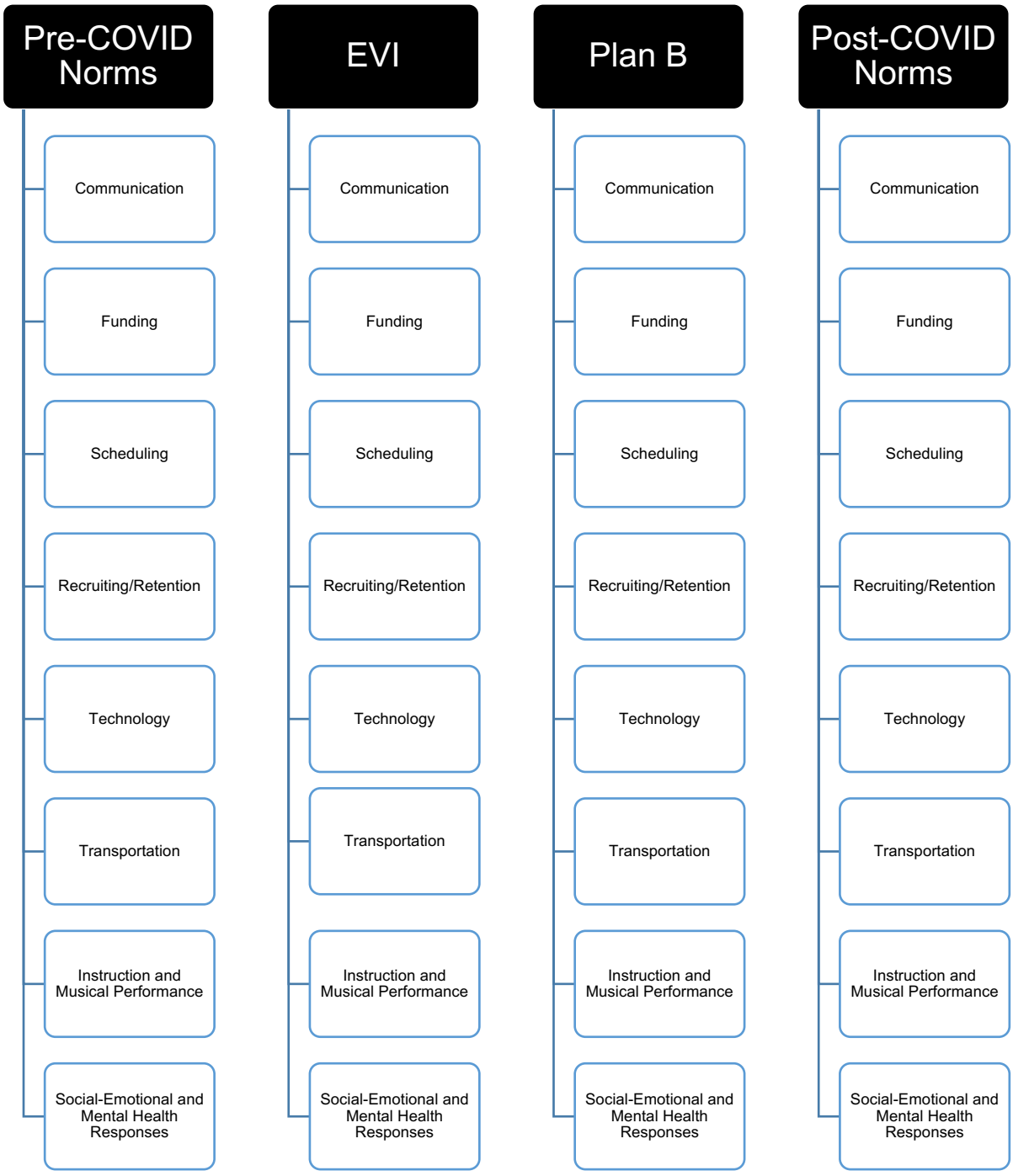
Data Analysis

Data were viewed through a pragmatic lens. Pierce, James, and Dewey comprised the three philosophers responsible for the development of this primarily American philosophy (Hodges, 2017). The major tenets of Dewey's pragmatism included the plurality of truth, theoretical problem-solving subordinate to practical application, and active engagement by the student in educational experiences. Dewey's definition of an experience required the following components: completeness, distinctness, identifiableness, seamlessness, cumulativeness, and forward momentum (Hodges, 2017). My selection of pragmatism as a primary lens was predicated upon my concurrence with Dewey's major tenets, my agreement with his description of an experience, and my belief that music education may be and should be a unique process for every student. As a single, exploratory case study, analysis through a pragmatic lens was appropriate. My choice of a pragmatic lens informed my research through an allowance for multiple truths and allowing me to accept interviewee experiences as their respective truths. I was also able to simultaneously process and understand multiple stakeholder points-of-view because of my selection of a pragmatic lens.

Interview data were coded in HyperResearch 4.5.4, a qualitative research coding program. Within HyperResearch, I set up 9 cases, one for each stakeholder interview. I used *in vivo* coding for the first round of coding, maximizing my ability to code inductively, and yielded over 1,000 initial codes. *In vivo* coding was appropriate for my coding choices, as it relies upon the data to produce codes, is utilized in the first phase of inductive coding, and is recommended for beginner researchers and provides the researcher with an opportunity to retain the voice of the interviewee(s) (Saldaña, 2021).

After a period of familiarization with the data, I began sketching possible secondary coding methodologies, and compared them to Saldaña's (2021) coding method selections. I selected simultaneous coding for my second round because it "… is appropriate when the content of the data suggest multiple meanings that necessitate and justify more than one code" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 124). In simultaneous coding, multiple codes may be applied to a single datum. Because I selected simultaneous coding, I was able to view all coded data in overlapping chronological periods where appropriate and focus on comparison of data between chronological and categorical codes when necessary. Simultaneously assigning chronological codes and categorical codes provided a suitable framework from which to view and organize collected data (Yin, 2018) into different matrix categories. As documentation and archival data are frequently used to triangulate other data sources, I did not use *in vivo* coding for the first round of coding for documentation and archival data. Documentation and archival data were printed and hand-coded with simultaneous coding within the matrix presented (Figure 1). Data that were not related were excluded from results.

Figure 1. Simultaneous Coding Matrix Outline



Within each of the four chronological periods I selected for coding and presentation purposes, time-series analyses were conducted regarding each code (Yin, 2018) and were presented in chronological sequences within this document. Codes were grouped into relevant

emergent themes of: *Adapting Instructional Approaches, Allocating Resources, and Responding to SE and MH Needs*.

Contextual understanding of the data and its significance required viewing data as related to temporal, spatial, historical, political, economic, cultural, social, and personal concerns (Stake, 1995). Temporal understanding was required as the event being studied was marked within a clear start date within Excelsior. The research questions for this study were aimed at answering some spatial questions. Historical understanding was provided by data from stakeholder interviewees, historical documents, and archival data. Political, economic, cultural, social, and personal concerns were each addressed within the study by stakeholder interviewees and triangulated with other data sources.

Validity Measures

Yin (2018) identified tactics to ensure validity within case study designs targeting elements of construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. I utilized these tactics as a guide for maximizing validity in my case study design. Multiple data sources and interviewee draft reviews of interview transcripts ensured construct validity. I clearly defined key terms and specific concepts for the study. I ensured internal validity through internal stakeholder and external researcher review of raw transcription data and coding procedures respectively. Triangulation between and among data types including documentation and archival records, stakeholder interviews, field notes, and Federal, State, and local laws and policies ensured internal validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I compared data, searching for confirming or disconfirming evidence, and ensured stakeholder interviewee responses were supported by at least one additional datum. External validity was not a concern, as I used this exploratory case study to convey lived experiences as shared or implied by interviewees and clearly articulate the

selected case in relation to COVID-19. I have not attempted to generalize the findings of my study to the population of rural middle school bands in North Carolina.

Addressing Ethics

Yin (2018) directed that researchers must include informed consent practices, avoid deception, remain aware of privacy and confidentiality concerns, protection of vulnerable populations, and ensure equitable participant selection as minimum levels of ethical considerations within a case study. Informed consent was provided through a description of the study that was provided to stakeholder interviewees. Deception avoidance was ensured through internal stakeholder and external researcher review of raw transcription data and coding procedures respectively. Stakeholders each reviewed their respective interview transcripts and ensured their accuracy. I asked a fellow researcher to provide feedback on my *in vivo* coding process. Protection of vulnerable populations was ensured through pseudonyms for stakeholder interviewees and redaction of identifiable information. Interviewees were able to select their pseudonyms if they wished. Student interviewees were former students in the case rural middle school band to ensure no retribution or retaliation could negatively impact the students.

Researcher Lens

A researcher's subjectivity is unique to each respective research site and interaction, both fostered by and dependent upon it (Peshkin, 1988). All prior experiences shape the way we respond to any given research data (Peshkin, 1988). Therefore, researchers should identify their subjectivity, and always remain conscious of it throughout the research process (Peshkin, 1988).

I am a Southern-born, White, Anglo-Saxon/Native American, Protestant, straight, cisgender, heteronormative male. Growing up in Louisiana and Mississippi, I was blessed to enjoy the rich heritage associated with each of those states. Along with the traditions and history

of each state, I noted the poverty around me in my communities, having myself lived in poverty in middle school and high school. My hometown in Mississippi boasted a population of 145 people per square mile when I started middle school. Through travel and various experiences including serving in the Marine Corps Bands, I have noticed a considerable discrepancy between the "haves" and "have nots" worldwide. Most of my nearly forty years as a public-school student and teacher has been in rural, Title I schools. I prefer teaching in rural schools because I know the programs there need practitioners to deliver quality instruction as much as, if not more than, suburban and urban schools.

As a veteran teacher more than twenty years, with ten of those twenty years spent teaching in rural schools and living the experience of rural communities and education, I am intrigued by rural education student/teacher connections, school/community and band program codependence, and the magnitude of opportunities presented to students through their music education experiences in rural secondary school bands. North Carolina has been home to my family and me since 2015, and we have lived and worked in rural communities since that time.

As a band director, the connections I have made in rural communities with students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other community partners have been enriching and positively shaped my life both as a student and as an educator. My longest-lasting relationships in adulthood were formed during my middle and high school years in band, theater, and choral groups. Rural school music education can provide students in middle school music performance classes with opportunities similar to the ones I have just described.

My lens as a student, educator, and researcher may have interacted with my case selection through my chosen criteria. I searched for a case in which the band director had been teaching in their current location for over five years, thereby suggesting a solid understanding of

the community in which they teach and potentially live and allowing them a fair comparison between pre-COVID-19 and current teaching situations. A case that epitomized the relationship between school and community according to the criteria I established was key because in my experiences, the community is such a vital component of rural school music program successes.

My expectations for what I found were shaped by my past experiences learning and teaching in rural middle schools (Peshkin, 1988), and I remained aware of my bias throughout the entire research process. My lens, however, was an asset throughout the research process. From the germination of my chosen dissertation topic to my semi-structured interview question composition, through interviews and data analysis, my lens was advantageous due to my own similar lived experiences, an appreciation for rurality and rural educational experiences, and an awareness of likely follow-up question material for stakeholder interviewees. My lens also informed my interpretation of my findings, which was beneficial in providing me with an ability to better understand the lived experiences of others.

CHAPTER IV: CASE DESCRIPTION

Introduction

Driving along state highways in transit both to and from my interview appointments, I noticed considerable consistency in my daily observations. I was starkly aware of the seemingly endless fields growing corn, soybean, tobacco, wheat, hay, and numerous other crops. The fields were occasionally broken up by single-family residences or what I assumed to be a family compound. Greens and browns prominently marked the landscape in a way that one might expect of a rural location; no cookie-cutter suburban housing developments here.

The people mowing their lawns as I drove by provided a friendly wave or nod of greeting depending upon which implement they were using to manicure their property. The smells of cows, chickens, pigs, and goats dominated in some areas as my window was cracked. There was some degree of beauty, in my mind, to all of this "rural," from the differences between livestock varieties to the neatly organized rows of corn set to make maintenance and harvest as easy as possible.

Virginia Creeper, honeysuckle, and other vines created a gnarly exterior for everything they covered – especially the fenceposts separating plots of family land from one another. Vines provided skin to the skeletal framework of creosote posts and barbed wire fences. Most structures and properties seemed well-maintained. The occasional barn or outbuilding, however, had been lost to time and the elements over long periods of use or disuse throughout wet winters and hot summers.

I may have passed thirty vehicles on my 30-minute drive. Occasionally, I was concerned about the curves on the state highways I was travelling as some cars, trucks, motorcycles, and

18-wheelers liked to use both lanes in those curves, some worse than others. Tree canopies and some branches occasionally made it hard to see what was coming within or around them. At one point, I passed an 18-wheeler hauling a full load of live chickens that emanated a sharp and familiar scent.

I saw a man using a divining rod, presumably to locate and dig a well. This art form has been passed down for many generations. I wonder if it will be lost over the course of the next one or two generations because of technological "improvements." While I am no Luddite, I sincerely appreciate that humans have been able to thrive for sometimes more than three generations using the technology they grew up with.

An old barn was being renovated at the intersection of two of the state highways I traveled along while moving to and from my interview locations. Business signs dotted the landscape indicating services of Mom-and-Pop shop businesses based on private land. Services from Automotive Repair to Taxidermy and Animal Harvesting were advertised along my route.

In this chapter, I present a description of the Excelsior Middle School, divided into three sections: (a) Interviewee Profiles; (b) Description of the School Band Program; and (c) Stakeholder Attributions as related to Excelsior Middle School, the county in which it is located, and the Excelsior Middle School Band.

Interviewee Profiles

In this section, I share a profile of each interviewee, including their description of Excelsior Middle School and its ruralness through anecdotes and stories that they shared. Stakeholders generally described the case rural school and community with fondness, identifying the size of the school as beneficial in some ways and compared Excelsior Middle School to other non-rural schools. The rural anecdotes and sentiments provided by stakeholder interviewees,

when viewed collectively, created a picture of a community and school based upon personal relationships more so than procedural requirements, with different behaviors and occurrences than one might experience in a suburban or urban setting. While I spent little more than a single hour with most, I enjoyed learning about their respective experiences as related to the case rural middle school band program during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Elisabeth – Band Director

My first interviewee was the band director from Excelsior Middle School. A pre-existing professional and personal relationship allowed for a simple initial discussion regarding my intent with this study, and a quick agreement to participate. Elisabeth arrived to our first interview session dressed in a t-shirt, blue jeans, and sandals – attire commensurate with the hottest summer on record in North Carolina that we were experiencing. Thankfully, the study room we used for interviews had a thermostat which was set to a lovely 66 degrees Fahrenheit, providing us both a welcome reprieve from the hot July sun and overbearing humidity, despite the HVAC whistle from the dulled silver-grey floor vent in our room.

As a band director, Elisabeth has worked in the rural county in which Excelsior Middle School is located for seven years and has been in her current teaching position at Excelsior Middle School for the last six years. Elisabeth had much to say about the state of the Excelsior band program, benefits and challenges as related to COVID-19, and what policies and procedures were advantageous or hindrances to her program. She described student interactions that she perceived as particular to her rural teaching experiences:

> I enjoy when a kindergartener comes up to me and shows their photo of them holding the deer head of what they just killed with their bow hunt…That's something you don't get in

other places. It's really nice. It's really refreshing. Like, “That song reminded me of a time a tractor ran over a deer, and then my daddy went and…” (Interview 1)

Elisabeth also suggested that being in a rural school setting allowed for professional support and growth she might not get in other settings.

> So, it's [also] administrative support from our district arts administrator coming in. I just found an old write up of one of my observations from them the other day, and it was so detailed, and so helpful. And I mean, she had written…[a] Google doc of text of “Here's what was good. Here's what you can adapt.” And it was just for teaching. It wasn't musically related. It was classroom management and just little things to tweak here and there. I was just really tactfully done. And not all administrators are like that. And I look back at it, because I was cleaning up my desk at the end of this year. And I just, I was shocked. I was like, “Well, no wonder this first two years didn't feel as hard as they should have.” So, I think it [a rural school] was also a good environment for me to make mistakes. (Interview 1)

Willis – Administrator, Principal

Willis agreed to meet me shortly after I completed my interview with Elisabeth. Like each of the interviewees, my scheduling of Willis’ interviews occurred initially via email, but switched to text messages per his request. I sent a confirmation text the night prior to our interview, to which, he responded affirmatively. When he responded, he did so with a degree of excitement and intrigue I was not expecting.

Willis has worked at Excelsior Middle School over ten years and has developed strong relationships with his staff and with his students and their families. My impressions of him upon our first meeting were that he is a selfless individual, dedicated to his craft. His

social/professional relationship-building has served his school well and will continue to serve the school. Willis is reflective and reflexive, while maintaining a fun-loving persona. He described how he began at Excelsior:

> First off, I mean, I decided to do my school internship there because it was completely a different setting than what my teaching experience was, I taught at inner city at a high school, and so doing something really completely opposite of that [being rural]. And then middle school is something why I was first interested in working and being a part of Excelsior Middle School. And then, and then I was hired for a couple of years at a different middle school. And then there was some transitions that what happened was principal shifts…but as far as being at Excelsior Middle School, it wasn't necessarily about whether it was rural or not, personally. It was, more or less, I love the school with the teachers, the kids, it was just a great setting. And, it's just a good fit for me. And it's been a good fit for me for a long time… I think the, as far as things that are interesting, [and] are different, the political climate is very diverse…we have a lot of people that are extremely conservative, we have a lot of people that are extremely liberal, we have a lot of people that are in between. And so, it's just that it's one of the unique things about being in our part of a rural district, right. We're not necessarily completely rural, like some areas are but we're not suburban or city like other places are...It's just working in a rural school. (Interview)

Willis revealed his lack of opportunities to really process what had occurred over the last three years with regard to COVID-19 and its impact on him personally but has reflected much on the way COVID-19 impacted his school, educators, parents, students, and other stakeholders.

Diana – Arts Administrator

The Arts Administrator for the Excelsior Middle School LEA, Diana, is a consummate professional in all areas of the arts. She arrived to the interview location she selected on a sunny, pleasant day in August of 2023. She greeted me with a smile and a quick, polite discussion about the weather, and quickly segued into our reason for meeting that day. Diana has decades of history within the Excelsior LEA and has served in her current position for approximately ten years. She shared an anecdote about her previous role as an elementary music educator in the same county:

> I pulled up beside of his car every day I came, and it was the day of the pig sale at the stock yard, so he [the school principal] always had a trailer behind it where he delivered the pigs before he came to school. (Interview)

Her deep understanding of the of Excelsior and the county in which it resides impressed me during our conversation. Diana explained her perceptions of advantages that came with working in a rural school, particularly for arts educators:

> Well, just the makeup of a school system in a rural setting is so different from a public school system in an urban setting, it is just smaller. I live outside of an urban setting. And oftentimes, many people would say, 'Well, why don't you go to that urban school system because you'll make more money?' But my reply was 'Yes, but I won't teach in the school system where the Superintendent walks in my classroom, pats me on the back and says, 'I'm glad you're here.' It's that personal one-on-one, knowing the people you work with. Also, being an arts teacher, as seems to occur in more metropolitan settings, you might be more likely to get moved around. And I wanted the situation where I had some longevity to get to know the students, you don't get to say that as an elementary teacher,

you don't see them long over a year. But then you get to watch their growth from kindergarten through fifth or eighth, or whatever it is. And I would like to know, “I'm going to stay here, I'm not going to be moved, right, into one school for two years and move to another.” That's not always the case. But I'd seem to observe that more in a larger system, not a smaller system. (Interview)

Brian – Parent of Former Student, Ava

Meeting Brian was a bit of a surprise to me, as I had been communicating with his spouse in terms of setting up our interview as well as the interview with his daughter, Ava. Brian’s demeanor demonstrated to me that he may not have fully understood what he was getting into when he arrived at the interview location. While he was not unpleasant, I do not believe he expected to be interviewed that day. I asked him if he would be comfortable participating, and he agreed. His responses seemed to be succinct and cautious. When I asked him about his perception of the ruralness of the school system and Excelsior in general, he stated, “Other than having a longer drive? I did not necessarily think that the rural aspect played a large part in my thinking of her education.” (Interview).

Joseph – Parent of Former Student, Andante

Joseph, the parent of Andante, spoke candidly and supportively of Excelsior and its impact on their child. Joseph’s SE intelligence provided me with a raw and emotional view of their perceived challenges and benefits attributed to COVID-19. Responses related back to their family as a whole, and provided several attributions related to how their student fared during EVI, Plan B, and the Post-COVID Norms.

Joseph described differences between their previous urban community and their current rural community:

> [D]efinitely the amount of space that's surrounding us, which is quite large, and everything appears, and seems to be, at least 25 to 35 minutes away. But we are fortunate living in a little bubble in [community name]. And we are very lucky that we had the middle school in the community which was walk-able, but I think that little nuance of like the transportation and stuff, because when the kids were smaller was different, but yeah, that that seemed to stand out to me that that was very different [than their previous urban living situation]… [W]hen I look at any forum that I am on locally, that seems to always be the big thing is "Oh, here we go, I gotta go out, and it's 35 minutes to go find something." So, I think that although I have grown accustomed to it, and you kind of just know what to do when you go out and how much to purchase so that you don't make multiple trips…Yeah, I think that there's more of a community feel where I am that people seem to really lend a hand more so. And, definitely more accountability, people volunteer, more neighbors are more visible." (Interview)

Joseph went on to specifically described the differences in the school communities.

> I even… you know, if I compare the school system, even I just felt like the schools here seemed more hands-on. And, more in an intimate way. For sure, I know, where I came from, they [schools] have a very good reputation, but it was just a…massive amount of people that you kind of feel lost. And just going through the flow, we're here, we felt like definitely more part of the community, like a fabric of the community, which was a really good feeling. Yeah, I think that…just that feeling that people do for each other, which is really nice. And that's actually what we were looking for. (Interview)

Ava – Former Student in the Case Middle School Band

Upon meeting Ava, I knew immediately that my visage was a potential barrier to her comfort in our interview setting. I purposefully adjusted the pitch of my voice, engaged her in small talk related to her current likes/dislikes, band experience, and appropriate band jokes. I moved slowly and experienced a noticeable shift in her demeanor after about 10 minutes of as much "getting-to-know-you" as one might experience in that timeframe. Throughout our interview session, she laughed often, and provided an unfiltered view into the life of a middle school band student during EVI, Plan B, and return to current state of education at Excelsior. Ava learned how to play trombone virtually, as she started sixth grade band during the 2020-2021 school year. Ava experienced some challenges learning virtually, but also found some solace in being able to practice and learn away from the potentially prying eyes and judgmental ears of her middle school peers. When asked what a "rural" school was, she responded with,

> Maybe a school that isn't like, surrounded by a lot of people or buildings or stuff, but still some enough that it like functions well and healthily. But not it, but it's not like overcrowded, or, like, not functioning properly or something like that maybe. I guess that's something for all schools that you that should be able to. But, like, there's a healthy amount of kids in each class. (Interview)

Andante – Former Student in the Case Middle School Band

Andante required no "getting to know you" period to establish a comfortable environment. I got the idea that he would be comfortable in his own skin in almost any scenario. Forthright, candid, and willing to explore his emotions, Andante seemed to have never met a stranger and looks for ways to interact with people in his environment in a positive way.

He responded to my question of "What is a rural school?" with:

> And then in terms of just like academics and people, I feel like the fact that it's like in a rural area, this area kind of means that like, you know, you have a little more focus on you in terms of academics, because there's not as many kids and it's not just a giant school where it just there's a bunch of kids in there, and the teachers kind of just have to get stuff done. (Interview)

He described many facets of his experience during COVID-19, one of which was his SE and MH shift from pre-COVID through his return to in-person instruction. His memories of his middle school band program were positive, and his honest responses were appreciated. Though Andante considered the academic focus to be positive, he also identified a disadvantage to the rural setting:

> Sometimes I feel like, oh, we're kind of like, isolated. So just this one middle school kind of close. Nearby, there might be a couple other in the county. But just kind of that that feeling of like where you kind of feel disconnected from every everywhere else almost (Interview)

Duncan – Community Partner

Duncan has worked with Elisabeth over the course of a 13-year friendship/mentorship. He has worked as an instrumental educator for many years and has taught at all levels between middle school and university-level. Most recently, Duncan has served the case middle school band as a percussion instructor for several classes one time per week and coached a middle school percussion ensemble comprised of students from the case middle school band. As an academic, his day job, he seemed intrigued by the interview process, and was complimentary of the research topic I selected. Duncan was thoughtful and funny. When I asked him what made rural schools different than urban or suburban schools, he responded:

> I would say I think, you know, that's a really difficult question. I haven't really even thought about that that much. But that's probably the reason one of the reasons I'm here. I think there's definitely a sense of community, but that that happens in other school systems as well. So, I can't say that…That's not exclusive to the rural experience. But yeah, I would say there is definitely a sense of community…I would say, I would say that probably sends a strong sense of community, family community…That's really a difficult question. It could be a combination of socio-economic background, combination of just sheer of logistics, logistical background, some of the students I know, at Excelsior live like that, that whole area is just like this own little community. So, you get a lot of students that may live in a community right across the street, but then you get some that may live a little farther away…farther out. So, logistics with regard to potentially busing or could do that or family situations where you've got both members of the family working. (Interview)

Stakeholder interviewees provided a range of responses as related to what a "rural" school is. Ava identified population of the area and geographic proximity to other buildings as key components to a rural school. Andante provided a definition dependent upon a feeling or emotion of isolation or singularity. Joseph's response was related to both geographic isolation and a close-knit sense of community. Duncan's response incorporated a number of factors including school logistics, student family socio-economic status, and a sense of community, although he also stated that a sense of community is not limited to rural schools or communities.

Description of the School and Band Program

Excelsior, the pseudonym of the case school in this study sits neatly nestled adjacent to a suburban-looking community. Houses were built in neat rows, with shallow front yards, and

narrow house fronts. All houses along the road nearest the school boast a single, sapling-sized tree, and some have a row of hedges dressing their front porches as white tips dress French manicured nails. The school seems to have been built along with the community in which it resides, or the neighborhood may have been built to match the school's existing architecture, which is defined and accented by mid-century modern features such as a slanted roof, a variety of construction materials, and large windows. Street construction seemed well planned, and well-constructed. A natural flow of traffic is clearly defined by the layout of the streets and driveways around Excelsior. (Researcher Memo)

The Excelsior Middle School building was located in a central North Carolina county, and was within driving distance of several large, North Carolina universities and colleges.

Excelsior hosts approximately 775 students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. One in five students in Excelsior is considered poor. Despite the number of students who are considered poor, Excelsior Middle School out-performs state averages in both math and reading and is not a Title I school. Minority enrollment was 31.6% with the majority being Hispanic/Latino. The student to teacher ratio was 18:1 (USA News, 2023).

The band program at Excelsior Middle School has a history of success over the past ten years. The band director prior to Elisabeth set into motion processes and procedures that Elisabeth have continued over the last seven years. Each school year, over two hundred students received instrumental music performance instruction in band classes, slightly less than one-third of the school student population. Band had become such a draw for students that school scheduling was reliant upon the band to recruit enough students to sustain a minimum of 210 students, or other elective classes were overburdened. Each grade level had two, forty-five-minute class periods devoted to band; one brass and percussion class, and one woodwind class.

Students from the Excelsior band program comprised the majority of the middle school participants in All-County Band. Students were encouraged to take private lessons from a list of recommended instructors.

Attributions

Stakeholder interviewees were asked to describe their attributions of school band program successes. Conversations with stakeholders yielded numerous responses regarding attributions of band program success as well as overall school attributions in the case rural middle school band program. Overall, interviewees described their attributions of program success to a team-based approach from the community, the band director, principal, staff, and county administrators. Diana shared that the district has supported and continues to support the arts but cautioned against falling into a sense of complacency.

> The [Excelsior] successes I attribute to the community and the supportive parents. I think you don't get kids who are this involved without something right going on at home, or in the people that they're surrounding themselves with. And then I've had some really great administrative support as well. They've mostly just left me to my own devices. There's, I hear very few 'no's', which is nice...They mostly find ways to make the vision happen, other than space. And then yeah, it all comes down to the community support, but being able to hire clinicians to come in every so often, even finding volunteers... But again, it's all community buy in all the time. So yeah, I think the program drives because of that. And, and we try to do a good job of getting out into the community and planning as well, which makes us that much more visible. And then hopefully, you create a cycle, you don't have to work so hard in 10 years... [T]here's a lot of excitement around joining the band, because we don't offer too many electives... But, I think, at this point, gotten to

where it's part of the community, and people talk about it, and they want their kids to join it... But, but yeah, I think I think the main, the main factor for me being at that school is that the students are engaged, they do enjoy this. (Elisabeth, Interview 1)

Brian and Joseph identified the principal as having positively impacted the school experience at Excelsior for their children. Brian stated:

I thought most of the time, the engagement level with the teachers and was good. I did like, I know he's moving on. He did he did seem to be supportive of the music program, the arts program, and not just focused on academics or sports or something like that. So that was…I actually I did like that aspect. (Interview)

Joseph's thoughts were similar and included some more personal information about their children. Joseph specified that Willis managed challenges as they were presented by Joseph or their children:

I've had ongoing positive experiences with the principal. One of my kids has a 504 plan, and that's been implemented. And really, they've taken care of that. I've had a bullying issue at the school, they've taken care of that. I overall, I'm, I'm just very satisfied with the school. And I definitely feel happy that my older child was able to attend there, although COVID was most of the existence for him. (Interview)

Diana suggested a positive trend in the Excelsior band program beginning with the band director prior to Elisabeth. The band culture was firmly established, and Elisabeth picked up right where the previous director left off:

It was really the person who came in before [Elisabeth]…that started the change. And I mean, they came in from out of state didn't have teaching license, but they came in and made a huge impact… to change the culture of that program that you know, "You want to

play an instrument, you can play an instrument. I'll get an instrument in your hand, and I'll show you how to play that instrument." And it was a good setup, then, for the person to come in. A lot of the cleanup work was done. (Diana, Interview)

Joseph also identified positive staff interactions with other stakeholders through procedural norms for Excelsior, and specifically the band program:

> So, the school, which is very unique to me, it's situated in a neighborhood. So, I feel like for a middle school that is quite unique. And I, I feel like the, the staff members at Excelsior are the majority are very positive, warm, welcoming. For example, every morning, we have the music teacher outside the door when the children are coming to school and welcoming and just positive. Fridays, music is blasting the teachers dancing just makes you feel really connected and welcomed. (Interview)

Andante also showed his perception of the uniqueness of a rural school being located within his neighborhood and celebrated Excelsior:

> Well, the best thing for me was that Excelsior is located in my neighborhood... And then in terms of just like academics and people, I feel like the fact that it's like in a rural area, this area kind of means that like, you know, you have a little more focus on you in terms of academics, because there's not as many kids and it's not just a giant school where it just there's a bunch of kids in there… I feel like the school was actually really good at making sure that everyone kind of had a focus for what they needed academically. (Interview)

Brian, Joseph, and Duncan both identified Elisabeth as the single biggest reason for the Excelsior band successes. When asked what stood out to him about Ava's band experience over her three-year period of participation at Excelsior, Brian stated, "She was always very

enthusiastic about band. She had very fond admiration for Elisabeth and gets Elisabeth's style. It definitely suited her and made her enthusiastic about band in general" (Interview) Joseph stated,

> The band director at Excelsior was probably one of the biggest reasons my son is where he is today. The band director just truly, like, allowed for creativity and for him to develop and really see show him that he has a gift which has been incredible and very supportive... And I'm really, really happy that Andante has this one particular school. (Interview)

When I asked Duncan what he thought was the biggest contributor to the band program's successes, he provided the following response:

> I would say the organizational skills of the director. The pace the director set up…the general just overall vibe of the room, that is almost always by the director. So, I mean, the general aspect of say, the combination of seriousness, combined with fun, enjoyable, fun experiences, friendly competition, a sense of helping one another that I noticed that a lot…My, what I saw was excellent. A great culture of respect. responsive teaching, responsive instruction, positive instruction, yet very disciplined instruction. (Interview)

Diana provided a macroscopic view of how support of the music program at Excelsior has maintained and grown. She described a support network of senior, county-level administrators, and a constant advocacy for the arts as a whole:

> The district has just always, always had an emphasis on the importance of the arts… I mean, some Superintendents have been stronger than others. But there's not been massive cuts to programs. I mean, were talking, you know, 40 years here. And it's always…the community has supported…It's a good thing that we're not cutting programs, but we have to remain vigilant that we don't just accept that's the way things are going to be. I

> think we always have to be advocating, you know? It's easy to advocate if things start getting cut and everything and you're in reactionary panic or a mode. But you can't just work that way...Keep kids out in the community performing. Don't make all of our performances…about doing it for your school. Same thing for visual arts. You know…put things out in the community in places where people see there's art going on in our schools, and they're sharing it with the community. (Interview)

Stakeholders in Excelsior Middle School band program generally identified positive relationships and a team effort as contributors to successes. Elisabeth and Diana credited the administration, parents, students, and community. Joseph and Brian both identified Willis and the teachers at the school as key to the school and band program successes. Every stakeholder group identified Elisabeth as a major contributor. Stakeholders also denoted the location of Excelsior Middle School was convenient and made them feel safe, and that the school is welcoming and positive.

CHAPTER V: CHRONOLOGICAL DESCRIPTIONS AND EMERGENT THEMES

Chronological Descriptions

In this section, I identified and described the chronological durations of the periods I discussed within this study: *Pre-COVID Norms, Emergency Virtual Instruction (EVI), Plan B*, and *Post-COVID Norms*. I provided additional information on how and why Excelsior moved from one chronological period to another and included stakeholder anecdotes related to each.

Pre-COVID Norms – August 28, 2017 – March 15, 2020

Pre-COVID time period includes August 28, 2017, through March 15, 2020. The case middle school band program was on a positive trajectory for the two and a half school years leading up to COVID-19 beginning in school year 2017/2018 (Diana, Interview). Pre-COVID challenges, as shared by stakeholder interviewees included needing more space (Elisabeth, Interview 1) and an assistant or co-director for Elisabeth (Elisabeth, Interview 1; Diana, Interview). Diana signified uncertainty with the possible growth of the Excelsior LEA (Interview) and described the structure of the schools in the Excelsior county as challenging:

> I think the big challenge is the structure with K-5, K-8, K-4, 6-8, 5-8 [schools]. You know, we sound like we're a measuring stick here…the lack of conformity. It affects scheduling. It affects how we deploy our resources. And it's a challenge because I understand why people want their community schools. I mean, it's one of those issues as I try to see all sides of it. I really do. But, it's a challenge. Then when it comes to scheduling…when it comes to resources, I mean, you take the five, K-8 schools and somehow put them in another configuration. Think of the middle school band that could be built! Think of the consistency of the instruction we could offer! (Diana, Interview)

Emergency Virtual Instruction (EVI) – March 16, 2020 – December 6, 2020

On Monday, March 16, 2020, Governor Roy Cooper initially indicated a school closure of "at least two weeks" in a press conference, having issued COVID-19 guidance through Executive Order no. 117 two days prior (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Diana suggested that, "[W]e all had it in our head, this is just gonna be for a few weeks" (Interview). Excelsior remained in a state of EVI through December 6th, 2020, which was initially characterized by zero in-person contact between stakeholder groups. Sixth-grade beginner band students finished their musical journey of learning in a virtual setup in school year 2019/2020.

> I didn't really know what COVID was. Yeah, I remember in sixth grade. There's a Washington scene on TV in our social studies class. And they were talking about like this outbreak of COVID. We're like, "COVID…What's COVID?" …I just remember everyone like whispering around the school like what's coming, and then the day before we got out for virtual, our PE teacher or health teacher was talking. She was like, "Oh, guys, everyone's saying that we're gonna get out of school. Don't worry, you're gonna see me next week we're going to be back at school. Okay, cool? It's not gonna be that big of a deal." Literally the day after we were virtual. (Andante, Interview)

Plan B – December 7, 2020 – April 18, 2021

On December 7th, 2020, students at Excelsior either returned to a blended form of instruction known as *Plan B* or attended a completely virtual instructional setting similar to EVI, but with more dedicated infrastructure, known as *Virtual Academy* (*VA*). Students whose parents/guardians opted them into *Plan B* were split into two different cohorts. Two days per week, one cohort attended in-person instruction, and two additional days of the week, the same

cohort would learn via virtual instruction. Wednesdays were reserved for virtual office hours or virtual instruction. Returning to any sort of in-person instruction provided stakeholders with a new set of challenges to accompany their excitement for returning to something closer to pre-COVID norms.

> When they opened up to let students come back, I think that was December 7… Yeah… I just remember these dates, because they were like really important, I guess. But I remember I was sharing a lot with my friends too, because we found out we're like, we're gonna we're going back December 7, right. I actually didn't go back on December 7. But that's when they started letting students go back, I went back like two months later, around like February. And that's when we were in person to the plan B thing kind of, um, so I had, I had virtual band from, like midway through the sixth grade, and then the beginning half of seventh grade... We were in our multipurpose room, which is a lot bigger. And you know, the flute shields and bell covers and all that. Yeah, all those were implemented. (Andante, Interview)

Post-Covid Norms – April 19, 2021 – June 9, 2023

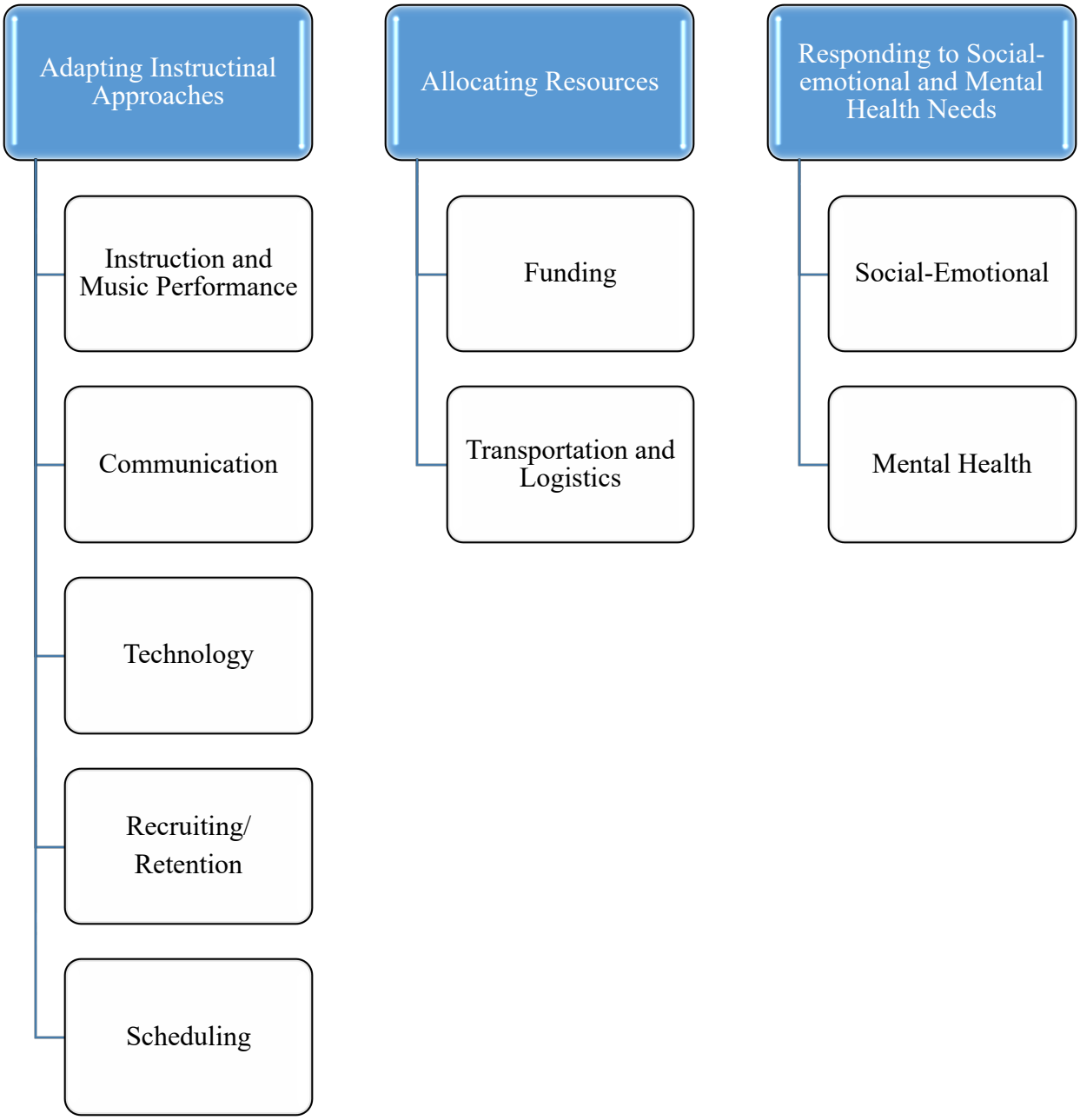
I selected June 9, 2023, as the final day of Post-COVID Norms as it was the last day of instruction for school year 2022/2023, and as I began collecting data over that summer. Stakeholder interviewees could only describe their transition to post-COVID norms through that date. Students returned to full-time, 5 days per week, in-person instruction. Elisabeth shared numerous ways in which the Excelsior band program was successful in navigating COVID-19, but identified one challenge that has had far-reaching effects on the band program and public education in general:

> No, I think we totally messed up really bad. By the end, it wasn't even so much the technology being the problem. The problem was, we lowered our standards so much to pass kids through to the next grade level during COVID that kids realized, "Okay, I don't have to do anything. And then I don't do anything, my teacher's gonna beg me to do one thing and turn it in, and they're gonna bargain with me and say, Well, if you just turn in this one thing, I will pass you"... And once you learn that the school work's not important, the cat's out of the bag. Like, whether it's true or not, that's what we taught. (Interview 2)

Emergent Themes

Data analysis resulted in three emergent themes: *Adapting Instructional Approaches, Allocating Resources, and Responding to SE and MH Needs*. These themes were present within each of the four chronological periods presented, *Pre-COVID Norms*, *Emergency Virtual instruction* (*EVI)*, *Plan B*, and *Post-COVID Norms*, and were presented as independent timelines within each theme. For example, I presented the theme of *Adapting Instructional Approaches* with each of its subordinate codes and described each code from *Pre-COVID Norms* through *Post-COVID Norms* from start to finish (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Emergent Themes



Adapting Instructional Approaches

The case middle school band program was on a positive trajectory for the two years leading up to COVID-19 (Diana, Interview). Elisabeth and her predecessor director developed

positive personal and professional relationships with other stakeholder groups. Students found that band was a positive social opportunity for them (Elisabeth, Interview 1; Andante, Interview). Recruiting/Retention efforts were effective in that the band enrollment was approximately 200 students out of 775 who were enrolled in the school. The Parent Teacher Association (PTA), Booster Club, and the Excelsior administration financially supported Elisabeth's efforts in ensuring student performance opportunities at Music Performance Adjudication (MPA), at community events, and All-County, All-District, and All-State venues. Andante's recollection of this time period was positive, and he stated, "Ms. [Elisabeth] did like a really good job of like, making sure it was fun. So, I did really enjoy it" (Andante, Interview).

Instructional approaches changed during the four chronological periods established within this study regarding the following codes: *Instructional Delivery, Communication, Technology, Recruiting/Retention, Scheduling, and Performances*. Each of these six codes are presented below.

Instructional Delivery

The band was rehearsing in their cramped band room, with Elisabeth essentially unable to move around the band room due to overcrowding (Interview 1). Prior to COVID-19, Elisabeth was teaching from a combination of resources. As she described:

> I started with a program called Rhythm Bee, which I had picked up in Texas and then very quickly moved over to Teaching Rhythm Logically. And that is what we still use… It introduces quarter notes, rests, and you know, kind of goes from there. Until I think they ended on around six-eight patterns, stuff like that…We use Essential Elements 2000 method books, and sixth grade is usually in book one for the whole year. (Interview 1)

Beginner students were allowed to switch to baritone, horn, and tuba in January based on audition results. For seventh- and eighth-grade students, materials included a mix of sheet music and books. Elisabeth also implemented something that she termed "play your face off Friday."

> I use a Drumbeat app instead of a metronome. And that runs through the big speakers. And they just go from number one till whenever I feel their face is falling off and we take a break and then we keep going occasionally stopping to change the meter…The drumbeats are pretty fun. That's a little different. I don't think everybody's doing that. (Interview 1)

Instructional Delivery EVI

Administrative efforts leaned away from instructional delivery for elective classes during EVI, and toward ensuring student physical and SE needs were being met. Elisabeth cited a split emotional and intellectual response to directives from her administration:

> And, and I love my administration, but they basically told all the specials [electives/encore] teachers just make it fun, which was a little soul crushing. Like, that's all you're here for is to just make it fun for them. But I can see multiple sides of this. You're trying to prevent core class learning loss, the parents are tearing their hair out because they've got their kids at home and they just want them to pass science. But we were the complete bottom of the totem pole. So, it was actually important that we made it fun, and gave them something they wanted to do during the day. But again, it's tough for a band director who wants greatness all the time to pull back and only have the desserts all the time. So, you find a way to hide the vegetables in the dessert… (Interview 1)

During the initial weeks of EVI, some parents voiced a concern about their students learning and being online. The response from the Excelsior district was to mandate "packet

learning" as an option for students whose parents did not or could not ensure their students would complete work electronically. While packets could be utilized in most classes to sustain, if not grow student learning opportunities, Elisabeth did not believe packet learning would be effective with her band students:

> That was for kids who their parents didn't want their kids online. There were some parents who were like, "They're not gonna be able to work on the computer, send it all home in packet form." And we were required to have packets. There was no way I could do that. (Interview 2)

After Elisabeth deemed packet learning ineffective, she shifted her focus to new virtual instruction delivery strategies to keep her students engaged. From Bingo games to new and fun apps such as FlipGrid and programs to use, and meme-based slide presentations (Class Slides, 2020; What Did We Do Today summaries, 2020), students had opportunities to learn in various ways. Elisabeth assigned eighth-grade students with transcription projects, completing practice tickets, forming chamber ensembles, and attending open practice sessions (Class Slides Eighth Grade, What Did We Do Today summaries). Seventh-grade students began the 2020/2021 school year re-visiting the treble and bass staves and the pitches assigned to the lines and spaces on each, completing a Kahoot, and remediating note and rest values (Class Slides Seventh Grade, What Did We Do Today summaries). Sixth-grade beginners practiced chanting the musical alphabet forward and backward, completed a Kahoot, and learned the lines and spaces of the treble and bass staves (Class Slides Sixth Grade, What Did We Do Today summaries).

She also got a Google Voice number so her students could call the number, record a short instrumental excerpt, and keep the recording times to a minimum (Interview 1). Duncan stated he agreed that EVI provided a lot of mandates, but few strategies that worked:

> Yeah, it was tough. I mean, there's a lot of just, let's throw this against the wall and see what sticks. And a lot of things of course, coming down mandated from the powers that be, "You have to do this, you have to do this, we have to blah, blah, blah." (Duncan, Interview)

Elisabeth was not convinced, though, that she was consistently getting the best work students were able to offer (Interview 1). Duncan agreed that many students were not focused or making their best efforts, and many dropped band:

> I know a lot of students dropped band because they just didn't enjoy it. They didn't enjoy doing it via Zoom. Some students, I would say the minority of students, though, some of them kind of thrived... But the ones that were like really kind of in the music, and, you know, there's like, "Well, I've got a little more time to practice now," and you're going to get some of those. But you're also going to get, "Oh, I got a lot of time to play video games now because I'm not going to school six hours a day," or whatever. (Duncan, Interview)

The Excelsior county LEA provided Elisabeth with a subscription to SmartMusic, an online music performance and grading platform that allows student and music educator access to a large collection of modern band repertoire and an algorithm-based sightreading generator. Students could perform their assessments within the SmartMusic platform, and receive instant feedback on tempo, pitch, dynamics, and articulations. Elisabeth described a balancing act between providing some relevant and curricular instruction and ensuring students still wanted to be in band class:

> Yeah, I mean, I think most of them hated SmartMusic. They hated doing those assignments, because a lot of them were perfectionists, and it was hard to get 100. And

then the others didn't want to practice and it was really hard to even get, you know, a 50. So that was tough. And so, I tried to limit those because I could tell that it was causing them not to like being there. (Interview 1)

As large group rehearsals and performances were impractical and, in some cases, impossible, Elisabeth chose to incorporate sectional work into her music instruction while teaching during EVI. She kept meticulous notes on her weekly lessons and made them available to students. She "mandated" sectional times for her students. As she stated,

> I would put them into breakout rooms, and pop into each one. I think, you know, it wasn't great. They didn't love it. But it was better than, you know, just playing along with me. Sixth grade, I had to because I had to have all the classes pretty mixed [brass, woodwind, and percussion], maybe two days a week. And it was really hard to teach 60 kids on a screen who are holding different instruments what to do for beginners…I made "mandatory" sectionals which I couldn't actually make mandatory. (Interview 1)

While Elisabeth was focused on providing relevant and meaningful instructional opportunities for her students, other stakeholder groups were navigating new challenges in different ways. Ava shared her challenges with learning music performance remotely. One challenge was consistently showing up to sectionals and other prescribed meeting times. Because she missed several Zoom sessions, she missed out on learning how to play written third-line D in bass clef notation on her trombone. She did not discover this until students were switched to Plan B (Interview). She also noted some challenges with learning over a video screen display:

> Yeah, we were on Zoom calls. And we like had to use the school supplies we had at home. So, there's that. But, also for band class, we would be in our, like, bedrooms or wherever … learning how to hold them over a screen. And once we actually got to school

> and like, were able to play the instruments, I actually learned that wasn't holding my slide properly…Like I was holding my, I was actually holding my instrument correctly, it was just the slide that I was not holding correctly…I was kind of like gripping it like this [demonstrates a fist]… (Ava, Interview)

Brian provided parent insight into his student learning how to play an instrument during EVI, stating, "Obviously, having her learn a new instrument in a remote setting is, I would consider, to be me major challenge which she somehow majorly overcame" (Interview). Parents and students were learning to navigate EVI challenges.

Teachers also experienced their own unique challenges. Duncan said teachers at Excelsior were having a challenging time as well with EVI and maintaining some semblance of order. He stated,

> But I mean, if you've got 30 people on a zoom screen and you're trying to discern what…it's a lot, it's a lot…I've just heard some of the talk like with teachers at Excelsior, and just some of the frustrations they're dealing with, you know? You've got all these students and you're trying to assess and you're trying to communicate, and everybody's at a different level, and everybody's got a different attention span… just the overall experience was tough. (Interview)

Interviewees described challenges they experienced during COVID-19. Students from homes with siblings enrolled in school K-12 schools presented a challenge with school schedules. Student stakeholders also cited challenges arising from a lack of instructional material availability. Band director and parent responses included witnessing a lack of engagement from students with regard to EVI. Community Partner responses included challenges related to instructional time and a lack of student skill development during the EVI period. Instructional

challenges were also cited by Elisabeth, and emotional challenges were identified by Joseph, Andante, and Duncan. “The sixth grade [cohort] after mine had to learn their instruments virtually. That was probably the worst point, right…to be in middle school in band, right, learning your instrument virtually?” (Andante, Interview)

Elisabeth was focused on how to hide the vegetables in the dessert as much as possible while meeting the administrative requirements set forth by Willis and others to just “make it fun.” Diana was heavily involved in procuring and distributing PPE for each band in the district, as well as ensuring delivery of instruments purchased with ESSER funds. Parent and student stakeholders were navigating home-based instructional challenges such as scheduling and other logistics related to space and emotional challenges while trying to remain healthy. Elisabeth summed up the EVI experience as student groups emerged:

> Your [first group] would be kids who kind of showed up but maybe messed around on the computer a little bit and didn't practice. You know, they also didn't do so hot. The kids who did the bare minimum of showing up and paying attention, maybe not practicing so much but showing up watching the Zoom call and doing everything with us, those are the kids from that point and up that were totally easy to work with when we got back to school, and I would say it was the majority., I'd say it's probably 70%. And, there's maybe 30% who just didn’t. And some of those didn't come back. (Interview 2)

Despite the challenges of ensuring maximum virtual attendance during EVI, Elisabeth identified one of the benefits was the “mandated” percussion sectionals (Interview 1). The percussion section grew in terms of individual proficiency during EVI, as students had time to devote to practice, and Elisabeth had more time to devote to individual musicians in the percussion section. In her words, “But I think as far as student progress, it was that little

percussion sectional every week that was the highlight because they were getting so much out of it… It was unbelievable" (Elisabeth, Interview 1). She stated that she spent more time with the percussion section than she has been able to provide them prior to EVI. In her words,

> It was more attention than they'd ever gotten. And that was I mean that was eye opening for me…you reflect as a teacher [on your instruction], but also I don't have time to sit there and play rudiments with them all class, which just made me hire a percussion instructor these past few years, but um, they got pretty good pretty fast. And some of them were setting timers to practice at home and I saw some serious growth in in percussion land. That was maybe one of the only positives. (Interview 1)

Elisabeth attributed successes for a small group of students to a pack or team mentality:

> I think the talent always comes in groups that were really motivated, and probably about five of them that just kept excelling. And they were showing up to Zoom calls. I didn't love this Zoom stuff. They said that, but they were practicing. They liked playing an instrument. One of them got really into it, and still is picked up tenor in addition to his clarinet. He started taking virtual lessons and really got into that. And yeah, that was cool…And they were pushing each other. Yeah, it was cool. (Elisabeth, Interview 2)

Elisabeth also identified individual student progress as a benefit (Interview 1) and Joseph provided a parent perspective on students who became inspired and pushed each other during EVI:

> I mean, so they just got ignited and wanted to just keep going. And then my son and maybe two others also organized the band to also perform in [neighborhood name] and just play hanging out there… and perform music, which again, allows the ears of the

local residents there to come out and be like, “Oh,…the middle schoolers are playing.” So that was nice, too. Very positive. (Joseph, Interview)

Being in middle school band and learning instrumental performance was a challenge for both Andante (Interview) in seventh grade and Ava (Interview) in sixth grade. Some students did not experience EVI band instructional delivery in a completely negative way, however. Brian identified a potential benefit as related to Ava’s music education during EVI when he stated:

> Not feeling that restriction in the classroom, she could reach out via email and just have that one-to-one question or action with Elisabeth… I know they did have small sessions. I don’t necessarily know how well Ava attended those…But that was an option as well. And I think she did go to some of them and those were not widely attended. So, there was more personal interaction. (Interview)

Instructional Delivery Plan B

Elisabeth initially suggested two major challenges with instructional delivery during the Plan B period. Mandatory breaks were one of the two challenges. The second challenge has continued beyond Plan B instruction, trying to get student focus away from the screen and back to practicing, rehearsing, and performing. Elisabeth also cited student SE learning loss and hypothesized the reasons for band learning loss:

> I mean, they're just behind there. They were lacking some [musical] strength there...But worse than that was their social ability and skills. And, they all felt a lot younger, a lot less maturity, and the younger grades in particular, which I can handle. That wasn't even the scary part. The hard part is like, they're just, they can't focus. They're so used to being on a computer and scrolling, that they've just ruined their attention spans…That was tough. Especially for the first sixth-grade class coming out of COVID... They're not going

> to be capable of what previous sixth-grade classes before COVID were capable of just because of the maturity issue and the lack of self-control. Because they want the candy that is the screen. (Interview 2)

Instructional requirements school-wide were significantly altered during Plan B to accommodate additional sanitation requirements. Elisabeth highlighted one challenge that was exacerbated by COVID-19, a lack of custodial staff to manage building sanitation.

> They gave us little spray bottles that we were supposed to spray and clean down all of our surfaces with. So, we were in charge of a lot of that [sanitation practices]. And then when the school shut down Wednesday, that's when they did the bulk of the cleaning…or supposedly did the bulk of the cleaning. I don't know how they could do that with…I mean, we always had custodial issues with just the amount of people we have working. (Interview 2)

Social distancing, instrument masks, bell covers, puppy pads were specifically cited by Elisabeth, Ava, Andante, Joseph, and Diana (Interviews). Flute shields and flute masks were a challenge for Andante. He described his experience of using a flute shield:

> And then you'd have to take this like shield thing, it would kind of flop up and down. Sometimes it got pretty annoying… Um, yeah, I did not enjoy the flute shields, even though they weren't that big of a difference. I definitely preferred the play mask… (Interview)

Flute players used flute shields, reed players used performance masks, and brass instruments were required to use performance masks and bell covers. Ava shared her description of a bell cover for brass instruments:

> Oh, and we also had bell covers. It was like this kind of almost like beret like hat-ish type looking thing, except you just put it over your bell. And it was kind of like a mask for your instrument…I'm in seventh grade and we realized like, "Oh, we don't need to use the band masks anymore…Seventh grade was also when the plastic flute cover things were introduced. My sister plays the flute…She said that it blew the air back at you like it because it kind of like hit the thing and then rebounded back. (Interview)

Ava's experience learning music performance on trombone during her sixth-grade year was marked by no in-person concerts. Her adjustment to performing during her seventh-grade year presented some challenges to instruction, as well. Distancing requirements during Plan B instruction required additional space between performers. In an organization like the Excelsior band program where space was already a concern listed by Elisabeth during pre-COVID norms, a new rehearsal location was used (Elisabeth, Interview 1). The multi-purpose room (MPR) of Excelsior was a tiled room, a combination of a gym and a small performance venue. Using the MPR provided Elisabeth and more of her students the chance to rehearse together more often than they would have been able to accomplish in the band room due to the additional space. Not only did Elisabeth have to modify instructional location for her band during Plan B, she also had to modify content delivery for her students as aerosols were a concern. Ava described both the change of venue to the MPR and the modification to content delivery:

> Tape on the floor, like spaced out with buckets and drumsticks. Next, we're learning how to like hit rhythms on the drum. And then after a couple of weeks, we moved to the multipurpose room, where we were, again, spread out. And it seems like so many kids, but it really was not. It was just the way that we were all spread out. (Ava, Interview)

With the added distance between students and a large number of students to teach, Elisabeth searched for ways to make her life easier as a music educator. She identified learning to teach with a microphone as a benefit during Plan B instruction, especially during required masking times.

> [Learning to teach with a microphone] was huge, because I've always lost my voice since as long as I can remember. And so, I've retained the mic, and I'm still probably not 100% with my vocals, but I think I would have had severely damaged vocal folds by now. Like, irreparable. Not even yelling it's just…when I was singing with elementary students [prior teaching experience] in their range or trying to teach in that multi-purpose room where the kids are eight feet apart with a mask on trying to just project as much as possible if you could. (Elisabeth, Interview 1)

As the band emerged into post-COVID norms, students were back in school five days per week, but they were not back to what one might consider pre-COVID norms. Ava (Interview) and Elisabeth (Interview 1) intimated that some students did not quite know how to act in school, nor were students able to demonstrate proficient playing that one might expect from third-year musicians under pre-COVID norms. Students had to re-learn how to exist in an educational setting in which rules, standards, and procedures govern the entire school day, some with a lesser degree of success than others. Ava recalled groups of students who struggled with returning from Plan B instruction when she stated, "A lot of the kids in that class chose to make trouble and got distracted a lot and got in trouble" (Interview). This was one indication that student SE needs were not met during EVI and Plan B instructional times.

In addition to SE deficits, Duncan identified instrumental performance weaknesses within the Excelsior band that were not present during pre-COVID norms, and shared his beliefs as to why those weaknesses were present in post-COVID norms:

> That's the thing. You just don't get that on Zoom. You don't get that. Like I said, I mean, the equivalent would be a sports team, how you can't have the same level of successes and confidence that you get when you play on a team with other people…So, the skill sets that they would learn by being in band every day are much weaker…there's no substitute for having that type of experience with a band director in a classroom, where you are learning together playing together learning to play as a, as a group together…that can't be duplicated or replicated. (Duncan, Interview)

Upon Excelsior Middle School's transition to post-COVID norms, Elisabeth was ready to tackle daily instruction, and brought Duncan in to assist in percussion instruction due to her realization that the band was simply too large to provide adequate instruction within the prescribed rehearsal periods.

> I would go in once a week, and work with their students, with their percussionists, their percussion section. So that involved usually me taking the group of percussionists, and I did it with three different classes… I would take the students out into a separate room, and we would go over just fundamentals, percussion fundamentals. And then by the…the semester was wrapped up in May, roughly mid-May or so… end of May, we had a couple little percussion ensemble pieces. (Duncan, Interview)

Communication

Prior to EVI, Elisabeth mostly used Remind as the primary communication source between her, students, and their parents. As she described:

> Mostly Remind. I've never really done email. It's taken a while to get everyone to adjust to this. But, Remind is the main form of communication. And then everything I send out that's a document about what's coming up. I also send out hard copies. Usually with like, the all the information sometimes with the QR code if I need them to like register for stuff. But that's pretty much it…it's constant. Pre-COVID, I did have phone calls home. (Interview 1)

In addition to the Remind app, Elisabeth also created a band website that was actively updated to share performance opportunities, photos, videos of band performances, and reminders for upcoming band commitments (Band Website).

EVI necessitated a shift from in-person communications to all app-based, or phone/email-based information sharing. While Elisabeth stated she had "always" used Remind, parents received weekly school-wide updates via phone messages. Joseph was not impressed by the type of communications outreach provided by the school:

> [D]uring COVID, there was no in person anything. And then, we did receive the automated phone calls where they would do updates and stuff. When I think back actually, there was like a lack of teachers. I think [they were] more engaged at that time because I know they were trying their absolute best; we all were. But, I wish there was just a little bit more involvement, maybe of, I don't know, just an update or something like other than just what assignments were due on Google Classroom. (Interview)

Remind, Zoom, and in-person visits for students/parents who were not connecting through electronic means were all used as communication methods in the band program and the school as a whole during the Plan B period. As instructional delivery was occurring both in-person and via virtual means adapted throughout Plan B, communication was necessarily

adapted to meet the needs of students in both scenarios. In-person meetings were available to parents who wished to have face-to-face interactions with teachers and administrators, and in-person check-ins were used to check on students at home.

> I do know that there were home visits happening within the school. I do know that teachers were checking in with certain families and getting them what they needed…supplies or food or whatever. They were trying not to lose kids…like kids who were not showing up or were not answering the phone. I'm pretty sure we were going to them in some capacity. (Elisabeth, Interview 2)

For Elisabeth, Remind continues to be the primary communication method. Excelsior Middle School weekly phone calls and emails are sent out school-wide with pertinent information. This is a continuation from Pre-COVID Norms for Elisabeth, and a continuation from EVI for the school as told by Joseph (Interview). In addition, the Excelsior band website is still operational and active in sharing information, photos, and videos of student performers (Excelsior Band website).

Technology

Elisabeth used minimal technology within her classroom prior to COVID-19. However, she did share a few apps she used in class to support student engagement. The Drumbeat App kept students engaged in ways that just performing from the Essential Elements 2000 books would not.

Technology use in Excelsior and the Excelsior band program were not dissimilar to other schools throughout the EVI period of instruction (March of 2020 – December 7, 2020). Interviewees indicated frustrations related to using new and/or unfamiliar technologies. While students were expected to utilize calendar apps or platforms, they were not provided with the

training to effectively implement the new technologies. Google Forms, Google Classroom, FlipGrid, SmartMusic, Kahoot, iPad, and Zoom were the most frequently reported platforms and apps (Elisabeth, Interview 1; Ava, Interview; Andante, Interview; Duncan, Interview).

One challenge as revealed by both Ava (Interview) and Elisabeth (Interview 2) was that while technology allowed for some continuation of music education instruction, it was not extremely effective in teaching hand and instrument positions, and likely other nuances of instrumental performance. When I spoke to Elisabeth during our second interview about teaching instrumental fundamentals over Zoom, and asked how she mitigated those challenges, Elisabeth described her efforts to provide a Zoom setup tutorial:

> There's some mirroring issues with setting up the instruments [on Zoom], most of it we didn't have to deal with. But there were a couple kids when we got back that maybe had hands backwards for or something weird. We did do a class where it was like, "Okay, go into your settings. Make sure this is on." The things aren't flipped around. But yeah, so those are some things that we definitely need to pay attention to. Making sure they can actually play the instrument and that their hands were in the right spot. (Interview 2)

Elisabeth used SmartMusic during EVI and Plan B as a key component of her ability to assess student performance. She stated that many students did not like SmartMusic because it required a high degree of accuracy which made it difficult for students to achieve a 100%. Andante had a different recollection of SmartMusic, and recalled his first experiences using the SmartMusic platform:

> I remember, she kind of told us that just like our school, like, purchased SmartMusic for us just trying to use. So, I think that was like the real thing that they were betting on? …And I remember looking up like all this cinematic stuff and all these cool pieces and

like, “Oh my god, I could play along with it!” So, that was pretty cool. So yeah, we used SmartMusic. (Andante, Interview)

While technology seemingly created some new challenges for stakeholders, it also provided some levity to an otherwise dreary situation. Elisabeth provided me with a meme slideshow she created with student assistance. Within the Google Slides presentation, one could see everything from SpongeBob and Patrick to other popular memes one might see on Facebook. The memes were each paired with some motivational statement or relevant music lesson material. Elisabeth also utilized Flipgrid to collect student contributions for a short virtual song performance:

> I wrote a really stupid song like I love SpongeBob and recorded myself on multiple instruments playing it but then I had in the song lyrics were just thank you over and over and over again. It's the thank you song. But I had kids send in Flipgrids of them all saying thank you. And I superimposed that on top of the song and it was like their faces and some of them were lit up. Like the song is like, Thank you. Thank you. Thank you... Thank you to everyone, and every thank you is a different kid saying it. And it got faster every time. So, perfectly annoying. It was hilarious. (Elisabeth, Interview 2)

Elisabeth retained the use of Flipgrid and some SmartMusic assignments throughout the Plan B period (Interview 1). As the transition to Plan B instruction provided new opportunities for the band to rehearse together once weekly, Elisabeth shifted her focus to providing playing opportunities for her students, and away from much of the technology-driven instruction she provided during EVI.

Learning new technologies during EVI and Plan B provided several opportunities for continued use during post-COVID norms. Elisabeth cited several uses of FlipGrid and

SmartMusic as platforms she used regularly prior to the expiration of Excelsior band's subscription to SmartMusic:

> I got really into FlipGrid; still use it. Loved SmartMusic while we had it… But yeah, Flipgrid has stuck around for sure. Because I can't do in-class testing. It takes like… I have to get through all the kids. So, it's just much better to be able to have them do that at home a little more work on my end, but it's not so bad because you can set a time limit on those FlipGrids too, which is great. So that's a nice feature for sure. (Interview 2)

Recruiting/Retention

Elisabeth (Interview) and Diana (Interview) described a strong recruiting and retention scenario in the Excelsior band program during school years 2017/2018 and 2018/2019, the two years prior to COVID-19. Elisabeth described the recruiting and retention progress during pre-COVID norms, "I think it went up a little bit. I can't remember the exact data...it was at least in the two hundreds. I think the program's always been in the two-hundreds. It's probably the low two hundreds my first year" (Elisabeth, Interview 1).

The band program experienced a dip in recruiting during pre-COVID norms. Ava said, "Our class [school year cohort 2020-2021] was very small, because you know, COVID and all" (Interview). The sixth-grade band class in school year 2020/2021was comprised of 75 students, a weaker recruiting number for beginning band students in Elisabeth's recollection (Interview 1). Elisabeth described normal sixth grade recruiting numbers as:

> Closer to 100? Maybe 120? But yeah, so it was a little low? I don't know if that was because we couldn't do as many recruiting tours, or if it was harder to get the information out. Because we weren't seeing the fifth-graders…they didn't come to visit us. You know, it was very much everything was virtual, I made videos. But it was 75. That said,

> most of the kids more than normal, I would say, continued on that year, because what else were they going to do? I don't think they wanted to do another elective. Or they just kind of stuck it out. I had some kids drop, but the band numbers held at 220. Even with the smaller sixth-grade class. (Interview 1)

Elisabeth attributed some of the recruiting and retention successes throughout Plan B to opening up recruiting post-EVI to students who had not had an opportunity to have band before. Elisabeth made a positive decision to recruit new band students from the seventh-grade student population.

> One of the other good things that came out of this is I took seventh-grade beginners for the first time after COVID, because I wanted to give some of those kids a chance if they just missed the boat…And I mean, we didn't start over, it was not an easy place to go. I mean, we had a baseline. It's not like we didn't do anything in sixth grade there. Those kids made progress. So, he got thrown in and was handed a clarinet and a book and explained a few things and sat next to a smart kid. And this is another shocker kid. He just really started taking to it. (Interview 2)

While Elisabeth does not regret her decision to open up recruiting to seventh-grade beginners during Plan B, she also acknowledged that it is not a sustainable practice based upon the size of the band program and the lack of a second, full-time instrumental music educator (Interview 1).

Elisabeth re-implemented recruiting tours after the transition to post-COVID norms. The band traveled to feeder schools and performed for their rising sixth-grade student populations. In addition, rising sixth graders were allowed to visit Excelsior, and were able to observe band rehearsals. Ava described one recruiting effort:

> The jazz band also does a like recruiting trip…usually in the winter. And, I was in the jazz band, so I got to be a part of this. And so, we went to each of the elementary schools that were going to be coming. And we performed our songs for them, talk to them about band, quiz them on the instruments we were playing, like, showed off the instruments like we like play a little bit to show them what the instrument sound like. And then…so they know like, "Okay, this is what I can do next year. When I get to middle school, this is these are the instruments I can play." (Ava, Interview)

Upon transition to post-COVID norms, Elisabeth decided to end the Plan B practice of recruiting outside of sixth-grade beginners due to a number of factors including pacing, student sense of accomplishment, and potential behavioral challenges for those students who could not or would not keep up.

> [T]he kids that we've got, they move so quick, that they wouldn't, it would be a disservice to them. And it'd be a disservice to the kid who's coming late. Because they would just feel, I mean, I've seen it happen before, like, with the same class with this one kid who was a superstar, there's another kid who's just like, "Yeah, I can't keep up." And then, was just a disaster for the year, you know, just a behavior issue, you know, all those things that you just don't want. And there's another part of it too, like when they start with you, and they're little, and they're still kind of fifth graders, you build trust, then it's much easier to control a little fifth-grader and like, make sure they're doing what they need to do. And then if you've known them long enough, as they become angsty teenagers, they know that you've seen them as little babies. They know what your expectations are... And once you've known a kid for three years, there's a little more respect there that you've built up. (Interview 2)

Throughout each of the four chronological periods established within this study, the case rural middle school band program continued to grow program numbers despite a low sixth grade recruiting number in school year 2020/2021. The same sixth-grade cohort retained more students than any other cohort the band director can remember. They lost 15 students out of 75 over three years. Additionally, recruiting from the rising sixth-grade class was successful in school year 2022/2023. According to Ava, "When I was in eighth grade, over half of the sixth grade was in band… They almost didn't fit on the stage for the winter concert." (Interview) Elisabeth summarized the recruiting/retention during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> But it was weird. We lost less from the younger sixth graders; sixth grade hardly dropped. That class went from 75 from sixth grade to 60 in eighth grade. 15 over two years is like maybe our best retention numbers ever. Whereas like some of the older groups, yeah, we lost bigger numbers, because they didn't enjoy computer band. And I don't blame them. And we're fortunate that we had sent out, you know, our jazz band to play for the rising sixth graders and they had seen it… I think families had an idea of what it was going to be or it should have been at that point. So, yeah, I think overall, compared to most programs, we came out great [in recruiting/retention]. Not perfect, but great…I feel like we did it right. You know, it's like, that worked out pretty well. (Elisabeth, Interview 2)

Scheduling

The Excelsior band program was forced to change their scheduling of rehearsals drastically from pre-COVID norms through EVI and Plan B periods. Throughout EVI and Plan B, numerous factors influenced the scheduling benefits and challenges stakeholders described.

Some challenges were specific to the school band, while others were specific to family situation, work calendars, and conflicts between band class schedules for Plan B and VA.

Pre-COVID-19, the Excelsior band program received two, forty-five-minute class periods for each grade-level band. Student musicians were separated into two classes, one class that was predominantly woodwinds, and the other that was predominantly brass and percussion (Elisabeth, Interview 1).

EVI Zoom sectionals attendance was not consistent, nor was it seemingly effective (Elisabeth, Interview 1). Elisabeth provided multiple time slots for each homogenous instrument group or instrument family. For example, a sixth-grade flute player could attend one of three sectional time slots throughout the week. Open practice sessions were available to students as well, further reinforcing the SE aspirations of Excelsior Middle School. Eighth-grade students were allowed to rehearse as small ensembles in breakout rooms. Students did not get to meet synchronously as a full band during EVI.

The EVI sectionals schedule and expectations were provided by Elisabeth (see Figure 3). lesson schedule As Elisabeth stated, scheduling was a challenge for reasons which were not directly related to the school band program, such as parents' work schedules. Multiple student households had to contend with who could be loud and when. The scheduling of Zoom sectionals did not seem to work for Ava when she was a sixth grade, beginner trombone player. As she stated, "I was not good at remembering that" (Interview). Ava also described an incident in which she and her sister were having a disagreement about how and when Ava should play her trombone.

> Like, I mentioned my sister before, she was also online learning at this time. So I'm trying to practice, right, like, play like maybe, like a note or two or whatever. She's on a

Zoom call. So, she's like, “You gotta be quiet, you can't do that!” I'm like, “I'm in a class right now. I can't, like, not do that.” I would like shut my doors, she would shut her door. And she would still like hear me. And she’d be like, “play quieter”. I'm like, “I'm trying my best.” She got very worked-up over that. (Ava, Interview)

Figure 3. EVI Schedule and Expectations

Remote Band Schedule				
Monday A Day	**Tuesday** B Day	**Wednesday** A Day	**Thursday** B Day	**Friday** Alternates A & B Days
6th grade ww 9:15-9:45	6th grade brass/sax 9:15-9:45	6th grade ww 9:15-9:45	6th grade brass/sax 9:15-9:45	A/B
7th grade ww/perc 10:05-10:35	7th grade brass/sax 10:05-10:35	7th grade ww/perc 10:05-10:35	7th grade brass/sax 10:05-10:35	A/B
8th grade A 11:40-12:10	8th grade B 11:40-12:10	8th grade A 11:40-12:10	8th grade B 11:40-12:10	A/B
6th grade flute sectional 12:15-12:45	6th grade clarinet sectional 12:15-12:45	7th grade clarinet/sax sectional 12:15-12:45	6th grade trombone sectional 12:15-12:45	6th grade saxophone sectional 12:15-12:45
7th grade flute sectional 12:45-1:15	7th grade trumpet/horn sectional 12:45-1:15	6th grade trumpet sectional 1:00-1:30	7th grade low brass sectional 1:00-1:30	7th grade percussion sectional 12:45-1:15
Open practice-all students 8th grade small ensembles 1:30 -3:00	Open practice-all students 8th grade small ensembles 1:30-3:00	Open practice- all students 8th grade small ensembles 1:30-3:00	Open practice-all students 8th grade small ensembles 1:30-3:00	No open practice 8th grade small ensembles 1:30-3:00

Expectations

- Attend your assigned sectional/small group - 30 mins per week. Counts towards practice time
- Attend at least one open practice for 20 mins each week. Counts towards practice time
- Submit practice ticket every Monday (once we start playing)
- 1-2 playing/written assignments/quizzes per week
    - no more than 30 mins of work. Playing assignments count towards practice time

Once we start playing instruments, the goal of students should be to try to practice 120 minutes a week. That's 20 minutes per day 6 days a week.

Several groups of students emerged according to Elisabeth. Some students logged on to their sectional meeting times but seemed distracted. Some students who showed up were unable to fully participate. Some students did not log on at all.

> Yeah, it was clear that they all had many different things going on in their home lives. So, I'd have kids who would show up and they, you know, had to be in a mute or they weren't allowed to play. Because Mom and Dad are on a video call, had students who would show up and not be on the same page and clearly watching YouTube videos or something, and would leave their camera on well past the class ending because they had no idea…Or maybe their parents couldn't be there to monitor stuff…Those ones were the most unsuccessful, the ones who did not show up…they had no idea what they were doing. (Elisabeth, Interview 2)

Although scheduling challenges seemingly prevented some students from fully participating, it was also beneficial to other students, according to Elisabeth (Interview 1). One benefit was that students were able to choose what kind of practice they did in front of whom. Another benefit was that Elisabeth had time available to listen to students who wanted or needed the time with her:

> [Tuesday] at 12:15 PM, we'd have a sixth-grade clarinet sectional. And I think those sectionals, the sixth graders who showed up to those like that also left in a few hours at the end of every school day for an open practice room. If you just wanted to come in and practice, I could put you in a breakout room with friends or you could just be on the screen with everybody. I think they liked that aspect. I think they liked anything where they had some freedom to play their instrument and if they had an opportunity for me to

hear them, because I got to hear them individually in those settings and open practice and in the sectionals, even if it was just for a little bit. (Interview 1)

Stakeholder recollections of scheduling during Plan B varied, but documents and archival records confirmed that scheduling for Plan B and VA occurred as follows:

Figure 4. Plan B Scheduling at Excelsior

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Monday
Core 1-4 & Elective 1</th><th>Tuesday
Core 1-4 & Elective 2</th><th>Wednesday
Core 1-4 & Elective</th><th>Thursday
Core 1-4 & Elective 1</th><th>Friday
Core 1-4 & Elective 2</th></tr>
<tr><td>Hybrid Group A</td><td colspan="2">On campus face-to-face classes</td><td rowspan="2">At-home, online, independent learning (Elective alternates weekly)</td><td colspan="2">At-home, online, independent learning</td></tr>
<tr><td>Hybrid Group B</td><td colspan="2">At-home, online, independent learning</td><td colspan="2">On campus face-to-face classes</td></tr>
<tr><td><u>Virtual Academy</u></td><td>A Day
ELA & Social Studies
Live Zoom

Math & Science
Independent Learning

Elective 1
Independent Learning</td><td>B Day
Math & Science
Live Zoom

ELA & Social Studies
Independent Learning

Elective 2
Independent Learning</td><td>Alternates A & B Days

Elective
Live Zoom</td><td>A Day
ELA & Social Studies
Live Zoom

Math & Science
Independent Learning

Elective 1
Independent Learning</td><td>B Day
Math & Science
Live Zoom

ELA & Social Studies
Independent Learning

Elective 2
Independent Learning</td></tr>
</table>

Scheduling during Plan B was challenging for several reasons. The first of which was adding variables to students' daily activities. The Excelsior county LEA was hosting two possible ways for students to attend classes, the Plan B, or "hybrid" schedule, and the VA schedule in which students attended all classes in a similar fashion to EVI. Elisabeth was allowed to meet with her band students on the Plan B schedule one time per week per class in a rehearsal environment for one and a half hours. Despite the availability and use of an air handler for the school that constantly replaces the air in the school building, the requirement to take mandatory, 15-minute breaks during class periods was enforced by the Excelsior county LEA. "Because our

school has constantly-filtering air coming in and out. It's not an every 15-minute thing. It's an all the time thing. But we still had to take breaks in our longer classes and go outside" (Elisabeth, Interview 2). The Excelsior band program was required to evacuate the rehearsal space every forty-five minutes to allow the air to be replaced. Instead of one hour and thirty minutes of instructional time, Elisabeth and the band received only one hour and fifteen minutes or less depending on transition times. Elisabeth attributed some retention challenges to the scheduling requirements imposed by the Excelsior county LEA:

> I mean, the, the biggest challenges were having to go outside and take these breaks and having a class that was that long. In fact, I know kids dropped band, because that period was too long. If it had been shorter, they would have stayed, but they're like, "I get bored." And it's like, yeah, me too. That was a struggle… scheduling was probably the biggest struggle. (Elisabeth, Interview 1)

Class frequency for Plan B band was reduced from pre-COVID norms by 80%. As shared by Elisabeth:

> I got every class once a week. And the virtual kids were pretty much shafted. But I would set up a Zoom at the back of the room for kids who could pop in, but usually they had another class at that time...The schedule wasn't set up for them for that to work. And then I think I think I was supposed to work with them maybe 30 minutes on a Wednesday or something. I don't even know if that was every week because Wednesdays were still the virtual day. I'm not even sure we were able to set up a class then it might have just been, like an office hour. (Elisabeth, Interview 2)

Ava provided her recollection of scheduling during Plan B from the student perspective:

> Like we had, um, we would have our normal classes every day. And then on Monday and Wednesday, we would have one of our encore classes over Zoom. And then Tuesday/Thursday, we would have the other encore class, and then Fridays it alternated… Friday alternated, and this would be weekly, back and forth. Right. So maybe one week it was like band the next week, it was maybe like PE and the next week it was back to band. (Interview)

Another challenge for some students in the VA was that they received less instructional time than their in-person peers. Office hours were provided for VA students, but according to Elisabeth, office hours times overlapped with other instructional meeting requirements for students who were on Plan B. Additionally, families of the few band students enrolled in VA wanted their students to attend band in-person, but there was no single schedule that would allow students to participate in one in-person class without them committing to attending all classes in-person. Elisabeth explained:

> I think my kids really wanted to come back. The band kids in particular. So, I didn't have to too many who stayed virtual. I mean, there was definitely some, there were also some families that called in and were like, can they just show up for a band and nothing else? And it's like, "Okay, why don't you just come back to school?" Because that's the most dangerous activity, according to everyone. Which it's not, but it's like, why would you be okay with that and not the rest of it? (Interview 2)

Student experiences varied regarding scheduling during Plan B. Andante described the scheduling during Plan B instruction as ideal for him, because he could get his work done on his own schedule:

> I kind of enjoyed just like the fun of like, being at school, and then also kind of doing your work at home, I had a really good rhythm of getting my work done. To the point where I like, wake up at eight, right, you have your Zooms…Um, and I just remember having a really good rhythm where I get everything done at like, 11:30 in the morning, because I was able to just like, do my virtual [asynchronous] work before my Zooms. And then once my Zooms are done, I was done for the today…I enjoyed it as a seventh grader. (Interview)

While Andante described his personal schedule during Plan B as enjoyable, he described the A day/B day setup for the band as a whole as ineffective because, "You can't rehearse a piece" (Interview). Andante also commented on the effectiveness of the instructional model used within Excelsior during Plan B. He stated that band was an opportunity for him to see other people he did not see at other points throughout the school day:

> I mean, it was effective in like, protecting people from COVID. But I mean, like in terms of academics, maybe not... And rather than switching classes, the teachers would switch classes, and you'd stay in the room. And personally, I kind of liked that, because you got to know your class really well, because you went to the same class[room] the whole day…Because when you'd go to electives, like band, obviously, there's different people and some things to switch up. (Andante Interview)

Elisabeth shared in her first interview that she usually gets two, forty-five-minute band periods per grade level in normal years. Upon transitioning to post-COVID norms, the Excelsior band program returned to the Pre-COVID Norms scheduling. Those two band periods are divided by woodwinds in one class, and brass and percussion in the other. Elisabeth also mentioned that scheduling does not always allow for more homogenous arrangements of

instruments in each class period, especially as band numbers are increasing year-to-year. (Interview 1).

Performances

With regards to performances, Elisabeth said "We would do winter and spring concert for sure. There was usually an Arts Night performance which was just like [all] arts teachers in the school" (Interview 1). She also stated that they played for a community tree lighting ceremony. "They ended up doing kind of two Christmas concerts because I don't like them playing all the same stuff on the winter concert as they do for tree lighting" (Elisabeth, Interview 1). Students auditioned for and participated in All-County, All-District, Solo and Ensemble, and Jazz Ensemble performances. The jazz ensemble performed for a community dance, and seventh grade participated in Music Performance Adjudication (MPA). In the two years prior to COVID-19, the Excelsior band program achieved a rating of: Superior (2018) with a repertoire difficulty grade III, and Excellent (2019) with a repertoire difficulty grade II (NCBA, 2023) at MPA.

Repertoire selection prior to COVID-19 within the Excelsior band program consisted of predominantly grades I and II repertoire as indicated by NCBA. Elisabeth identified this mean repertoire level when she stated,

> First year, that was probably mostly just grade one. Okay. Yeah. And then by the winter concert, they probably played some grade two on the winter concert. And probably stuck through the year with grade two, and not much has changed now. Every now and then I push them a little bit but depending on the class. (Interview 1)

During EVI, Elisabeth completed two virtual performances. One was with her students via Flipgrid submissions compiled over a silly song (Interview 2), and the other was a performance by the band directors in the Excelsior county LEA. There was no performance

repertoire from which to identify mean difficulty level during this period of instruction, as Elisabeth focused on delivering fundamentals of music performance instruction. (What Did We Do Today Slides)

MPA was not held for the Excelsior band's district in 2020 or 2021 (NCBA, 2023). Plan B performances were limited to one virtual performance in the winter of school year 2020/2021, as space considerations were still a concern. The challenge of performance space also raised concerns about the number of attendees and their proximity to one-another. Because of the aerosol concerns of attendees and performers, Ava described her seventh-grade year of school year 2021/2022 as a year of limited concert performances:

> We did our winter concert. And then we did not do the spring concert. "It's COVID, we'll do one concert." And that concert was basically the band in the multipurpose room. Except it, there were like cameras set up, and it was like posted on YouTube or something, so parents could watch, or whatever. (Ava, Interview)

Upon emerging into post-COVID norms, the Excelsior band program returned to performance norms similar to pre-COVID norms. The band participated in All-County, All-District, All-State, Solo and Ensemble, had an active, before school jazz ensemble that performed for recruiting efforts and performed in the community, a concert band that performed two formal concerts per year, and pep band that performed at some school sporting events. Duncan shared that the students at the Excelsior band program enjoyed performances, and explained the significance of performing within middle school instrumental performance instruction when he stated, "And the kids have fun, you know, the kids love Elisabeth. And they had a good concert. And, you know, they're kind of a confidence builder [live concerts]" (Interview). Elisabeth took her students to MPA in 2022 and 2023. The results were: Superior

(2022) with a repertoire difficulty grade II/III split, and Superior (2023) with a repertoire difficulty grade II/III split (NCBA, 2023).

Summary

The Excelsior band program experienced substantial changes between each of the four chronological periods described in this study. However, as the band program emerged from Plan B instruction and began creating post-COVID norms, it might seem to outsiders as if the Excelsior band program had not experienced the same trying times as other schools. The band was relatively unaffected by changes to communication, scheduling, and performances. The band was undeniably affected in the sub-categories of instructional delivery and performances throughout each of the four chronological periods, and recruiting during EVI.

Stakeholders identified benefits as (a) Elisabeth reported the use of percussion sectionals during EVI as one of the few instructional and musical benefits during EVI, (b) recruiting and retention for the sixth-grade class, while slightly smaller numbers ultimately yielded higher retention, with only fifteen students out of seventy-five dropping band over a three-year period, (c) Elisabeth learning to teach with a microphone, (d) appropriate use of technology to accommodate EVI and Plan B learning, and (e) student ability to perform harder repertoire from pre-COVID norms through post-COVID norms.

Stakeholders identified challenges as (a) students experienced difficulties with new technologies including Zoom, SmartMusic, and Google Calendar; (b) recruiting challenges during EVI due to the lack of in-person performance capabilities, (c) sustaining student interest during EVI and Plan B periods due to space and scheduling, and (d) a lack of equity for VA students during Plan B instruction.

Allocating Resources

Resource allocation for the Excelsior band program included identifying appropriate routes for funding and for transportation and other logistical concerns. Many of the challenges presented within this section were school-wide, but directly or indirectly affected the way the band operated and were therefore included.

Funding

During pre-COVID norms, Elisabeth described the funding of the Excelsior band program as receiving nothing from the Excelsior administration in the way of a dedicated budget she could use to purchase items for the band. She did indicate that she preferred the school cover the cost of buses and drivers for all things band-related with the exception of going to Carowinds (Interview 1). She received approximately two thousand from the PTA, and several thousand from the Boosters.

ESSER funds were acquired during the EVI period to help purchase instruments that otherwise would normally have required several years to save up for (Elisabeth, Interview I; Diana, Interview). While the instruments were not received until the Plan B period, ESSER funds distributed from the SEA paid off in a big way for the Excelsior band program. According to Elisabeth:

> So, I think [Diana] at the County level was able to get the ESSER funds to buy us some new instruments. So, we did end up with a few new used tubas and a bassoon. And in fact, I think we bought [individual business name] entire stock for the County which was great. And then we got a bassoon, and maybe a couple of double horns and a tenor sax. So that worked out pretty nice for us. (Interview 2)

Sanitization and prevention methods were purchased for the school with funds from emergency state distributions from North Carolina. Some of those purchased sanitation methods were more effective than others. In addition to sanitization methods and PPE, iPads were purchased for the school district teachers to facilitate Plan B learning between in-person and virtual student meetings, according to Elisabeth, who shared her recollections of purchases during EVI and Plan B:

> Puppy pads. Yeah. And flute shields and the county had purchased these like wands that were supposed to sanitize and then they showed up and they're like don't use them. They don't work…That was a big waste of money. So, iPads were purchased, I believe. And SmartMusic [was continued from EVI]. (Interview 1)

As the Excelsior band program emerged from Plan B instruction and began creating post-COVID norms, Elisabeth reflected on the disposal of PPE that was purchased during Plan B, stating, "…bell covers and masks which we are getting ready to throw out, but that's a lot of money to throw away" (Interview 1).

ESSER funds received during Plan B provided the band with several new, and much-needed instruments during post-COVID norms. (Elisabeth, Interview 1). Additionally, stakeholder buy-in is at an all-time high according to Elisabeth:

> The extra funds were a big plus, that came out of that for some instrument purchases. And then from there… I was also able to kind of talk more with our boosters and our PTA. I think we've done a better job now in the last few years getting on our feet with like getting fundraising getting a budget going for band expenditures, since we don't really get anything from the county. So that's, that's been good...And then like, I don't know what caused it, it might just be really great luck and good people, but the band

program has a lot of support from our administrators from our district arts coordinator, from the parents, the families, everyone's pretty bought in. (Interview 2)

Transportation and Logistics

For the purposes of this study, I included discussions of movement of people and things between places within the school. While some of the transportation and logistics items identified within this section are school-wide, they had direct impacts on band students, and are therefore included in this presentation.

Bus transportation at the Excelsior during pre-COVID norms was commensurate with rural school transportation costs and challenges. Students regularly used lockers to mitigate carrying undue amounts of books, instruments, and other school-related materials (Ava, Interview; Elisabeth, Interview 2). Buses were not needed for student transportation during EVI, but were utilized to create mobile hotspots for students within the district in outlying areas to have connectivity to complete their virtual lessons and assignments. Elisabeth stated, “Through the county they were setting up hotspots…definitely using those to go into certain neighborhoods to provide some hotspots for kids to do work” (Interview 1).

During Plan B, busing in the Excelsior county required by-household scheduling to ensure that students who were from the same household attended in-person instruction on the same days to prevent cross-contamination between cohorts A and B. Hotspots were still provided during Plan B instruction, as students were virtual three days per week. This selection of students attending in-person instruction caused some additional challenges with band as students could no longer be divided into classes based upon instrumentation.

I know that our AP had set it up to where we had kids going to school on the same day as siblings in the other schools because it was something like crazy percentage of our kids

had siblings, maybe 60-70% had siblings in another school, and we were doing two days a week. (Elisabeth, Interview 2)

Lockers were not utilized during Plan B in an effort to prevent the transmission of viruses. Ava described the change to locker use as a disciplinary and sanitation concern for the school, so the students were not allowed to use them during Plan B (Ava, Interview). Movement during the Plan B period required students to stand on mascot spots painted or taped onto the flooring at intervals of six feet in common areas such as hallways, the cafeteria, and the gymnasium. This process created additional space concerns. In Ava's words:

> [T]here were these like [spots], like taped to the floor or whatever. When your class was like going to lunch or something, whatever, you'd have to like, try to stay on a [mascot spot]… And then also in the lunch room, the same [mascot spots] were painted. So, you'd have to like when you when waited in line for lunch, you have to like stand on a [mascot spot]. And then someone moves, you just move up to the next [mascot spot]. Except there were so many kids that didn't really work that well. And then you'd have like that, the one or two kids who were like actually trying to follow the rules. (Interview)

Movement in common areas was not the only logistical concern for the band. In order to continue rehearsing during Plan B, Elisabeth had to manage student movement throughout the rehearsal facility as well as the location of PPE.

> Our band director told us normally, you would empty your spit, like empty all your spit or whatever on the floor. And she brought these things called puppy pads. They were just like these blue mats so that I was just like, if you need to empty your spit out, stand up and go to the puppy pad and empty out your spit there. They were like on the floor and kids come in at the end of the day to like grab their instruments and take them home or

whatever. So, they got stepped on a lot like shoved under chairs. And in sixth grade when we were in the multipurpose room, there was one puppy pad and it was over in the corner. And everybody shared. Those kind of those lasted through like maybe like half or three quarters of the way through [my] seventh grade. Eighth grade we didn't use them. (Ava, Interview)

Returning to full time, in-person instruction required parents to juggle schedules for transportation, sometimes between schools that are geographically scattered. Elisabeth shared insight into the transportation challenges still plaguing her school and the band program, especially for those parent stakeholders who have multiple children:

Like, I mean, the first thing that comes to mind would be just getting kids places… transportation, because people live far away. I mean, the school is in the neighborhood. It is easy for those kids… There's still kids who are kind of far…Something like our morning jazz band stuff…getting kids there before school, I think, is tough. And it's really our only option… But I've also had kids, you know, not be able to do All-County auditions and stuff like that, because they can't get there…I think we should almost like start working on better carpooling and stuff like that, for those outside of school events. I think that's a struggle still for many other rural areas. That's the first thing that really comes to mind…Oh, yeah. And then just like siblings, like, we get kids involved in lots of things. And our schools are not particularly close together, the elementary schools are close to us, at least. But the high schoolers are far away. And you got a kid in high school and a kid in middle school. It's tough to juggle, you know, multiple nights of concerts and football games and events and sports and all those things that are going on… And, you

know, we do our best to make sure the concerts aren't on the same nights and the feeder programs, but yeah, it's tricky…There's so much going on. (Interview 2)

Summary

Challenges identified by stakeholder interviewees related to resource allocation included: (a) logistical challenges during Plan B including no locker use, (b) social distancing, (c) logistical challenges when developing post-COVID norms with rehearsal spaces and (d) getting students to school for jazz ensemble rehearsals in the morning and after school or evening activities. Stakeholder interviewees described the following benefits related to resource allocation: (a) increase in total funding between pre-COVID norms and post-COVID norms, (b) ESSER fund instrument purchases, and (c) ingenious use of buses during EVI.

Responding to SE and MH Needs

SE and MH needs were present among interview responses from every stakeholder group. During pre-COVID norms, the band provided students with a place to be happy and healthy within the case rural middle school. Students and other stakeholders listed in the section titled "Attributions" in Chapter IV generally reported a satisfied affect with the case rural middle school band program. From dancing band directors directing dismissal traffic, to a sense of belonging by student stakeholders and parental buy-in, stakeholders reported favorable conditions within the band program at Excelsior Middle School.

Student stakeholders reported fear, uncertainty, and emotional turmoil in the initial days of the transition to EVI. Students who started middle school band during EVI may have had a challenging virtual experience not only from the lack of in-person instruction, but also in that they were unable to develop strong relationships through EVI as they might have been in-person. When I asked her about her SE and MH during COVID-19, Diana reflected her calm and cool response to EVI when she stated, "You just did it."

> Just trying to very much take each day, not worry, "Oh, What might happen down the road?"…Not that you didn't want to be proactive. But the research and everything was changing constantly…But you know, just that trying to keep up with "What's the next thing?" Looking ahead enough to know, "How are we going to adapt? But, I'm not going to panic about it. We're gonna figure this out." (Diana, Interview)

Elisabeth described the sectional meetings she set up as meeting a need for many students, because they needed SE interactions:

> And the amount of kids that showed up to that was surprising. And those are the kids that I assume were really just dying for some sort of connection with other people. I didn't

> really have any, like, one-on-one talks with students saying, like, “I'm really, really struggling.” It was just mostly through their actions. So, you could tell they missed their friends. (Elisabeth, Interview 2)

Students were not alone in their plight of dealing with SE and MH challenges. Responses, however, varied by stakeholder group. Elisabeth, in her first interview, for example, identified her emotional state during EVI as, “I mean, for me, I was just relieved. I needed a break. It was great. I loved COVID.” Elisabeth stated that she felt very little trepidation regarding her personal safety when she said, “I mean, I know I had other colleagues who were very, very worried. I have a maybe a misplaced sense of invincibility, but I still haven't gotten it. So, it was not maybe too misplaced” (Interview 1). Elisabeth also had a support network ready via her mentor and to assist her when she needed it:

> I felt like I could text her at any time. She was my mentor my first year. So, I felt like I had had that support. But you know, I don't think I talked too much to too many folks during that time. I had my family close by which was my social outlet, which was important. Really important… (Interview 1)

Coping mechanisms during EVI differed greatly between stakeholders. Elisabeth and her family engaged in family bonding cooking activities to pass the time and keep a sense of normalcy.

> [W]e started a competition, a cooking competition, because there's a lot of us. And we were in teams: I was with my 14-year-old brother every Monday night. And we had 10 people at dinner every night with priests next door and our seven family members and then another family friend. And yes, teams of two, and we would vote at the end of the week. And we did that for months and months, it was better than any restaurant. And we

all got better at cooking, and it was a blast. But, I didn't have to be with my family all day. I would just show up in the evening. It's like the perfect amount of chaos in the day. (Elisabeth, Interview 1)

While Elisabeth was relieved by the break in her usually-busy schedule, student and parent concerns and challenges remained with regard to SE needs. Some students were seemingly impacted in a positive way by the changes to their pre-COVID middle school band norms.

> And then yeah, there was just some kids who we had an open practice every day and they would just show up to practice in a separate Zoom room with their friends. And you could tell they just really needed to hang out with somebody in chat. And that was fine. Like, they didn't need to practice. Just go hang out with your friends because they're all stuck at home. And lonely. (Elisabeth, Interview 2)

Andante responded with little hesitation when asked about EVI and his emotional response:

> But I really did, like, miss, like, seeing my friends and even my teachers, too, you know, because even though you might not enjoy a class…This is what I tell people when they're like, how you like going to school? Well, school is the place where you like are with your friends. And even if it's in a structured environment, where it's like a boring class or something, it's still like an experience that you wouldn't get just sitting at home… And when I lost that, I was like a little upset about it…So, I wouldn't say like, I was like depressed, but I was like, I was pretty sad, right? I was just like, like sitting at home like, "Oh, my God it's kind of boring."... But then after a little while, I'm like, "Oh my God, I kinda want to go back." And the Zooms were kind of almost the highlight of my day. So,

I think overall, I was pretty much okay, but towards the beginning, it definitely did take a toll on my emotions. (Andante, Interview)

Parent stakeholders identified some challenges related to the family's MH state and the daily monotony during lockdowns and EVI. Part of the emotional challenge for Joseph, was twofold. They thought media reporting was one source of emotional turmoil. Another challenge Joseph indicated was the insularity of family life during EVI.

> And I think the news was so grim on and no matter what channel you put on, it was difficult to watch and digest everything. And I think the scare tactics that happened because of dealing with this, that I'm not going to go here, but it became a political thing as well. It all became, I think, scary for children; just the unknown of, "What is this? How long is this going to last? So, we're going to live like this for five years? How long is this going to go on?" I think that feeling was horrible…And then I think just as parents, always being with your kids all the time (because both my spouse and I work at home), that became tough too. Because I think part of a healthy relationship is that yearning to see someone and that wanting and looking forward to coming home and it's exciting. And when you're always together, it's like it becomes a little bit too much. (Joseph, Interview)

Joseph went on to describe the emotional toll on parents and extended family, as well during EVI. They identified not only the separation requirements, but the emotional weight associated with the possibility of infecting elderly relatives:

> Okay, so some of the lows were being isolated, being far from family, where we couldn't visit them, because the family members are elderly. And, so, we were putting them at risk, and so forth. So that was very, very difficult. I think those were the biggest things

for me too, just the isolation and the day in and day out of it. Kind of the same schedule, that could be very redundant. (Joseph, Interview)

Other interviewees described additional benefits including a number of students who not only survived the EVI challenges but thrived in spite of the seemingly overwhelming odds against them. Joseph identified the role they, as parent, played in their students' success during EVI, "So I think COVID was a period of just allowing them to explore themselves, and being there as like, a comfortable chair for them" (Joseph, Interview).

Although the EVI period overlapped between two school years, Excelsior made every effort to provide a sense of normalcy and closure for school year 2019/2020, A digital yearbook signing was set up for Excelsior Middle School through Josten's, the yearbook manufacturer (Team Meeting Notes, 2020). Elective teachers performed an end-of year parade:

> We did like a parade all the Encore teachers, multiple cars in the backs of trucks. Had somebody in the mascot suit…and we're waving and saying bye to the kids…you can see them all pressing their faces to the window, it was really cool...I'm glad we did it that way. I think's giving students a chance to respond and say goodbye, right? This was a concern for the school site. There's a social-emotional component. There's closure, just in general for the school year. (Elisabeth, Interview 2)

When the EVI period resumed with the 2020/2021 school year, The sixth-grade cohort who started band in school year 2020/2021 learned their instruments via Zoom for the first five months of their sixth-grade year. Their Plan B learning experience was challenging from not only a teaching and learning standpoint, but also a SE deficit standpoint. Students in that sixth-grade cohort arrived from several elementary schools having failed to form the bonds students might during normal school years. As schools are not close in terms of geographic proximity,

making friends prior to the beginning of sixth grade may have been challenging. Meeting over Zoom was less-than-ideal for creating new friendships. Ava explained her experience arriving to school during the return to Plan B:

> Oh, um, I didn't know anybody. Really, like I knew probably two kids, but they lived in my neighborhood. And, one of them was a woodwind [who was assigned to a different class period meeting]…So, I'm in sixth grade. I had no friends. Like, basically no new friends in band. (Ava, Interview)

Ava's SE needs were finally met when the band began rehearsing in-person on a weekly basis during her seventh-grade year, school year 2021/2022:

> And so, I kind of got to know who the other trombonists were there. And then seventh grade, we were back in the band, like, able to, like, sit next to each other, whatever, but we were like masking. Um, I met my friend, my friend Jana. Like, 'cuz we sat like one chair apart. There was a kid between us and then he switched over to baritone. So, we got to sit next to each other. (Ava, Interview)

Stakeholder interviewees described benefits during the Plan B period. Students returned eager for music, and teachers and parents enjoyed seeing which students thrived musically. There was an absence of typical middle school challenges such as bullying and "the teenage angst disappeared for a little bit, which is nice," (Elisabeth Interview 1). Andante experienced a positive affect related to academics, "I feel like the school was actually really good at making sure that everyone kind of had a focus for what they needed academically" (Andante Interview, 2023). Elisabeth reinforced Andante' statement with a brief anecdote about his progress throughout Plan B instruction in school year 2020/2021:

> And when he came back, he just came back with a vengeance after the virtual stuff. And we started jazz band again, I handed him an alto sax, which he picked up very quickly… We went to MPA, and he heard like a multi movement work, and then went home and tried to compose one that was pretty darn good. And he got into some jazz. I think he's gotten into the classical side more. But he just kind of wanted to do everything. He was composing. He was playing. He was emailing composers asking for the flute part for two songs that he liked. And, they gave it to him, which is just great, you know. And, yeah, and he had a good group of kids around him, too, that I think they were all kind of pushing each other to be to be really awesome. And just an incredible kind of growth there. (Elisabeth, Interview 2)

Elisabeth shared in pre-COVID-norms that she really needed an assistant. Plan B instruction exacerbated the need for another music educator in the classroom due to providing instruction in two formats. Additionally, Elisabeth indicated a challenge with attempting to figure out what the new normal would look like for sixth-grade beginners.

> I think…just getting them motivated and wanting to do it [school work]. And in a lot of ways, posed the same problem. I think the biggest shock to me was, once we started our first normal year, I thought, okay, seventh, and eighth, are going to be struggling. And they're going to need extra help and sixth grade, this is the rebuild year. It was…Those kids were damaged by this. And it was mostly a motivational thing…Because what we did is we didn't hold them to the standards…And so we lowered the bar and continued to lower the bar until it was, "Oh, just turn in this one thing and I'll pass you." And you don't fix that. I don't know if we'll ever fix that…I mean, the cat's out of the bag. (Interview 2)

When stakeholders adjusted to post-COVID norms, some reported a sense of accomplishment and gratitude. Joseph seemed to focus on the students who did not have the same experiences as students in the Excelsior band, “But yeah, we're lucky. We're lucky because I know many, many, many children really suffered during COVID. And that kills me” (Interview). Other stakeholders described challenges during post-COVID norms as similar in many regards to Pre-COVID Norms. Joseph identified a need for more SE and MH counselors and programs, especially after enduring EVI and Plan B chronological periods.

> Even after COVID, I was, I think, as parents we were expecting like, “Okay, now we'll be touch base more with students, students who are more vulnerable, who have more mental health issues already to begin with or are at risk for it.” I don't think that there was as much touching base with those children, as I think there should have been. And I definitely think there's a teacher shortage in [our] County and all throughout North Carolina, that I understand that that's a big reason why. We're lacking all that support and those resources. (Interview)

Upon transitioning to post-COVID norms in Excelsior, challenges remained. Joseph spoke specifically about the lack of available resources for students who may experience mental health challenges or have SE learning deficiencies or impediments. Joseph indicated their frustration and concern for the lack of resources devoted mental health when they said, “So, for me, that was and it still is, the mental health for the teachers, staff members and the kids…I feel like it's lacking. For sure,” (Interview)

Andante described his emotional musical journey throughout EVI and Plan B. Upon his transition to post-COVID norms, he described his desire to practice and improve beyond his peers. He also noted that he has friends from other counties who may have navigated COVID-19

differently. He perceived that they had different opportunities or more opportunities to play together more frequently, and that those additional opportunities may have been an advantage. Elisabeth encouraged Andante and his classmates to be mindful of students from other schools and counties who may not have had the same opportunities as the Excelsior band program. Andante stated,

> Yeah, I feel like we definitely came out of COVID a lot, like, better than a lot of other schools did, especially for like being a middle school. Because Ms. Elisabeth told us about like some of the other middle schools and she'd be like, "You got to be like, if you see kids that you know from other middle schools on field trips", …or "Be nice to them like because they might not have had the same opportunity as you did, because of COVID." She would tell us like, "You guys don't know how lucky you are to, like, have come out of like COVID in a way that you have, because a lot of other middle schools haven't been able to do that. And yes, it's really amazing. But you shouldn't be kind of like, sitting on this pedestal looking down at all those middle schoolers." (Andante, Interview)

Elisabeth provided insights into how public education can potentially recover from the challenges listed above, and pontificated on how student SE learning is slowly coming back to a sense of normalcy:

> I think it will get better. For a lot of reasons…I think millennials know what it's like pre-technology and post. I see a lot of parents cutting down on screen time. I'm hoping that it's a ton. And that kids are allowed to play outside and get bored again. Yeah, that's what will make band exciting. Because the bottom line is nothing is as fun as this [points to cell phone]. Nothing is as fun as a screen. It doesn't matter what we do. So yeah, but that

> was a big surprise and has continued to be a big challenge and is now turning into like, there's like weird [SE] drama that I haven't had to deal with in a while. And maybe that was a plus post-COVID that some of that drama just disappeared, because they all felt younger. I think they hadn't developed right. And that the mean, kind of cat-scratch drama just didn't really happen when we came back. Now it's back. (Elisabeth, Interview 1)

Summary

All stakeholders described SE and/or MH concerns in the Excelsior band program. In the majority of interviewee responses, SE and MH concerns were challenges within the school that were exacerbated by COVID-19. For example, Elisabeth (Interview 2) and Joseph (Interview) identified the problematic lack of adequate counselor services. Ava (Interview) and Andante (Interview) identified individual challenges with SE and MH respectively throughout the periods of EVI, Plan B, and Post-COVID Norms. Stakeholders cited challenges related to SE and MH during COVID-19 as: (a) a lack of SE growth opportunities for students who started band in sixth grade during EVI in school year 2020/2021, (b) group challenges related to SE deficit for the sixth-grade beginners in school year 2021/2022, and (c) individual student MH challenges throughout EVI and Plan B chronological periods. Stakeholders cited benefits as related to SE and MH during COVID-19 as: (a) demonstrated individual student resilience, (b) team mentality among successful groups of student stakeholders, and (c) the Excelsior band program provided opportunities for SE and MH growth for some students.

Culminating Thoughts from Stakeholders

Elisabeth

I asked Elisabeth how she would do things differently, if at all, if she had to experience the COVID-19 pandemic again in identical circumstances to the ones she had as band director during the actual pandemic. This was her response:

> I guess I wish I got more one-on-one time with each kid. That would have been good. Maybe set up some individual meetings just to talk with them, especially the ones that was worried about. And there were a few I tried with two I remember specifically not showing up…I feel like I had a lot of issues…Yeah, if I change one thing, it probably be trying to make the relationships a little bit better, so that when they came back, you know, they felt like they had somebody they could talk to if needed, maybe more so…I wish I could change that I had no control over them being at home and not being on a screen… I don't know that anyone came out with a better result. So, I don't know that I would change much other than just hoping to never do it again…I'm glad I got to that school when I did. If I had been a first-year teacher there, I think it would have been a traumatic injury that we would still be recovering from, whereas we kind of barely felt a blip in a lot of ways. (Interview 2)

Joseph

I asked Joseph how the overall experience of COVID-19 impacted their child as related to band. They provided this response:

> So, my son started out, obviously in sixth grade and band, I did not see a real excitement with band at all. I just saw that this was just another class. And then COVID hit. And when COVID hit, my son was lucky to have a teacher, a band teacher and director who

kept it going and had the class online. And my son really got involved at home and really started to enjoy band. Yeah, when I think back that that was probably one of the highlights was band. And then I guess, because it just was something different. And the engagement was different. And I believe that the teacher made that the way it was, it was nothing else other than the teacher because then it allowed the students to kind of blossom, which happened to my son, and then when my son returned after COVID. Interestingly enough, my son is now that is his absolute passion right now is music. And yeah, really developed that path and developed a huge passion throughout the interim between in- person and returned to in-person. It just kept going up and up and up…And I really, it's funny, you're interviewing me, because I really feel that all of this happened during COVID. And during COVID, like many of you know, you started to do different hobbies and pick up different interests just to keep busy and occupy our minds. And I think when he was sitting there on the Zoom calls, and he had a band class that just opened up a whole new vision, a new world for him, that he's, "I think I like this. This could actually be fun." So, yes, I think COVID definitely was a contributor in a good way. (Interview)

Andante

I asked Andante how his overall COVID experience has shaped his experience as a student musician. His response was:

I'm like, "Oh, my God, this is like really cool is where I want to become like really good and stuff and do stuff like [All-]District and [All-]State." Yeah, in eighth grade, actually, I didn't get close to [All-]State at all. I got into All-District and I made the bottom band and I was like, not mad. But I was very determined to do better the year after…So, I think the fact that I was in

person, and in eighth grade and being able to like rehearse and stuff…I think that that's kind of what sparked my interest in band. And so yeah, definitely big change between seventh and eighth grade. I think that this definitely could have sparked earlier if I was able to have that like, that same eighth-grade experience in my other years…But I definitely feel like it could have been sparked a lot earlier…if COVID wasn't like a thing in terms of my middle school band experience. (Andante, Interview)

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

The case rural middle school band program weathered the COVID-19 storm of EVI and Plan B with grace through reflective and reflexive practice (Elisabeth, Interviews 1 and 2; Willis, Interview; Diana, Interview), an active role in monitoring the most up-to-date scientific data (Diana, Interview), and making efforts to connect with students and keep them engaged in social emotional and educational processes (Elisabeth, Interviews 1 and 2). While the Excelsior band was ultimately described by stakeholders as "successful" in progressing to post-COVID norms from pre-COVID norms, some stakeholders identified challenges related to the rural aspect of the Excelsior Middle School and the Excelsior band program. Challenges indicated by stakeholders' interview responses were consistent with the challenges identified by Causby (2019), Teiken (2014), and VanDeusen (2016).

Pre-COVID Norms

The Excelsior band program was geographically isolated, received and relied upon funding from numerous sources including the Excelsior administration (for buses only), and PTA and Booster monetary support for music and instrument purchases and supplies. The band did not receive funds from the school administration or LEA administration that could be used for the purchase of instruments, consumable supplies, or music repertoire which was consistent with (McCracken & Miller, 1988). As indicated by Causby and Foster (2022), purchasing one instrument could require the band's entire budget. Excelsior's principal had been at the school for ten years, and Elisabeth was an experienced band director who had taught only in rural schools. Additionally, over 90% of the teachers at Excelsior, including Elisabeth, were

considered experienced, having taught more than three years. This high percentage of experienced teachers is an exception to the rural schools narrative (Donovan & Brown, 2021).

Elisabeth cited the need for both an assistant director or co-director and a new rehearsal facility due to the successes of the band program. Funding, however, did not allow for the hiring of another music educator, nor the building of a new rehearsal facility or relocation of the band's rehearsal space. This was consistent with Teachers College, Columbia University (2021) assertions that rural music programs often go without adequate rehearsal facilities. It also further highlighted the lack of funding within rural schools. As Excelsior Middle School was not a Title I school (NCES, 2023a), the lack of federal funding opportunities paired with the challenges of local funding experienced by the Excelsior Middle School band created some additional funding challenges for the band. The band received no budget from the Excelsior Middle School from which to purchase instruments, music, consumables, or other instructional materials. The Excelsior Band relied upon the PTA and the Boosters to provide the entire budget for the band.

Stakeholders identified their community as small, but tightly knit. Diana identified her fondness for the community in which she worked:

> 'Well, why don't you go to that urban school system because you'll make more money?' But my reply was 'Yes, but I won't teach in the school system where the Superintendent walks in my classroom, pats me on the back and says, 'I'm glad you're here.' It's that personal one-on-one, knowing the people you work with. (Interview)

Duncan highlighted a similar sentiment when he stated, "yeah, I would say there is definitely a sense of community…I would say…a strong sense of community, family community," (Interview).This is typical for rural schools (Teiken, 2014).

The Excelsior band program worked around schedules for other activities such as athletics and other club meetings, as students were often shared between curricular and extracurricular activities (Teiken, 2014; VanDeusen, 2016). Despite efforts to make extracurricular activities available to students, transportation remained challenging for some students as they had to ride buses or their parents are unable to ensure students arrive or leave on time for extracurricular activities due to geographic distance (NCDPITD, 2021). This challenge was especially difficult on families with students enrolled in two or more schools or with students who participated in multiple extracurricular activities.

Definitions of success for band programs differ by spatial-demographic labels for urban, suburban, and rural schools (Causby, 2019; Fitzpatrick, 2013). The case rural middle school band was a successful program, boasting student participation in All-County, All-District, and All-State events, a jazz ensemble that rehearsed before school, and regularly received Superior ratings at North Carolina MPA. Students were actively engaged in learning, and many of them took private lessons.

The program was successful pre-COVID, and one might imagine that provided some mitigation of potential challenges created by COVID-19. What was different about the Excelsior band program than other rural middle school bands pre-COVID was the longevity of Elisabeth's work in Excelsior. Elisabeth has served in her current position since school year 2017/2018 and has taught exclusively in rural middle school bands throughout her time as a professional music educator in North Carolina. Both of these factors contributed to the band's overall successes. By all accounts from other stakeholders, Elisabeth has created an environment where, in pre-COVID times, students wanted to be successful.

EVI

From the top down, no one seemed to know what was going on during the overnight transition to EVI (Diana, Interview; Elisabeth Interview 1; Willis, Interview). This debacle was consistent with Feindler's et. al (2021) assertion that questions regarding what should be taught and how it should be taught were being asked during this chronological period. There was not a stable, consistent target for defining success, or a vision for how to move forward (Diana, Interview; Elisabeth, Interview 1; Willis, Interview). Daily changes caused stakeholders to experience this portion of the COVID-19 pandemic as stressful, uncertain, and heart-breaking, which was consistent with Cheng and Lam (2021). The Excelsior band program response to EVI was similar to other secondary school band programs regarding scheduling (Kraft et al., 2021). There was no talk from the administrators about cutting the band program or asking Elisabeth to teach different subjects, which differed from many other places in the United States (Burnette, 2020; Garcia, 2023; Hirt, 2020; Kelly, 2021; Leguarda, 2023).

For band, specifically, in Excelsior Middle School, EVI created challenges due to the quick implementation, and lack of infrastructure to support large group rehearsals. This was consistent with findings in previous research by Rucsanda et al. (2021) in which music performance groups were unable to effectively rehearse or perform via online means. Recruiting was another challenge for Excelsior band during the EVI period, a finding similar to Kelly (2021). Recruiting challenges were attributed to several factors. (a) Recruiting tours were not possible during EVI, (b) Feeder schools were unable to visit the middle school during EVI, and (c) Parents were not willing to rent or purchase instruments without knowing how students could move forward with instruction during EVI. The recruiting numbers for Excelsior's rising sixth-

grade class in school year 2020/2021 were the lowest in recent history, a finding consistent with Parker (2021).

Time students spent at home while learning virtually was, as one might imagine, managed differently from home to home. Similar to findings by Hash (2021) and Kraft et al. (2021), some students failed to effectively engage in online learning. Elisabeth's assertion that screen time for students served as a barrier to progression in music performance education during EVI was consistent with previous research, as recommended screen times for middle school-age students were between one and one and a half hours daily (Muppalla et al., 2023). If students are expected to complete virtual work, screen time is a likely component. If students are asked to complete twenty to thirty minutes of daily work in each of four virtual classes, then students have already reached their maximum recommended screen time. Elisabeth insisted that screen time shortened the attention spans of her students throughout EVI and beyond. Muppalla et al. (2023) also recognized that excessive screen time, and multi-tasking screen time, negatively impact SE self-regulation.

COVID-19 exacerbated existing challenges in the rural community where Excelsior is located. The distance between home and school for packet pickup and drop off was challenging. Students in outlying areas had little or no access to high-speed internet connectivity and the school district parked buses with hotspots in particular areas to address this (Ascione, 2019). Ensuring student well-being through food insecurity mitigation from the Excelsior Middle School LEA was another challenge made greater by COVID-19.

SE and MH concerns dominated interviewee responses during EVI. Parents were concerned for student well-being, students were confused and scared, and administrators and band directors were doing everything they could to ensure SE and MH well-being for their

students. From dropping standards-based instructional requirements (Willis, Interview; Elisabeth, Interview 1) to creating opportunities for student closure including a digital yearbook signing (Team Meeting Notes) and an end of year parade for school year 2019/2020, educators and administrators demonstrated their SE and MH concern for their students. Stakeholder concerns related to SE and MH were appropriate and consistent with previous research related to SE and MH concerns during EVI, especially within rural areas (CDC, 2021).

Benefits discussed by stakeholders during the EVI period included groups of students who flourished. Some students demonstrated remarkable progress. Of all of the Zoom meetings hosted by Elisabeth, she described the percussion sectional times and the use of ESSER funds as the most-beneficial to the students and to the band program overall. These success stories are atypical when compared to previous research indicating a lack of student engagement (Hash, 2021).

Plan B

The transition from EVI to Plan B was another time of uncertainty. Some challenges related to attempting to teach during EVI carried over into Plan B and beyond. Unfortunately, VA students did not receive identical opportunities to learn during Plan B instruction, as scheduling did not allow for maximized instructional time in conjunction with Plan B students. This was consistent with equity concerns presented by Reimers (2022) and Soudien et al. (2022). Transportation and logistics were a large portion of the challenges discussed by stakeholders including moving from one point to another within the school, busing, locker use, and having teachers rotate throughout several classrooms to prevent student cross-contamination between homerooms.

Interviewees described remarkably few benefits during the Plan B period. Elisabeth learned to teach with a microphone, some students found new opportunities for SE growth, the band was able to rehearse in-person once a week, and ESSER fund acquisition and use positively impacted the band overall. Making new friends during Plan B instruction was important. Ava made friends in middle school for the first time during plan B, as she started band in the sixth-grade cohort beginning in school year 2020/2021. The prioritization and importance of SE opportunities for students was consistent with SE delivery within MTSS by Pendharkar (2023), and consistent with assertions by Katzman and Stanton (2020) that an effective online instructional delivery model should include SE integration for student success. If students did not login to their prescribed meeting times to stay connected, they missed out on the SE growth opportunities the Excelsior LEA and administrators were hoping to provide through the electives/specials team. Elisabeth's statement about VA students wanting to return to school in-person for band only, indicates that VA students seemed to be missing something in their instructional delivery:

> I think my kids really wanted to come back. The band kids in particular. So, I didn't have to too many who stayed virtual. I mean, there was definitely some, there were also some families that called in and were like, can they just show up for a band and nothing else? (Interview 2)

During pre-COVID norms, funding deficiencies within Excelsior Middle School band program were consistent with previous research by Causby (2019). Because of limited funding, ESSER fund acquisition was a huge benefit for Excelsior Middle School band, as they were able to acquire new instruments that might have required their entire budget over a three-to-five-year period. As Excelsior's band program received nothing from the school in terms of money with

which to purchase supplies, ESSER funds were welcomed, and greatly appreciated (Elisabeth, Interviews 1 and 2).

Post-COVID Instructional Norms

Elisabeth and Diana cited band growth despite EVI and Plan B. “You know, I almost think that program grew” (Diana, Interview). The Excelsior band program grew by 10% between pre-COVID and post-COVID norms, from the low two hundreds to over two hundred and twenty students, which is abnormal for band programs in post-COVID norms, especially in rural areas. Scheduling returned to pre-COVD norms of two, forty-five-minute band periods per grade level for sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. The band moved rehearsal locations from the MPR back to the band room, reigniting Elisabeth’s desire for different rehearsal space (Interview 2) and an assistant director or co-director due to the increased numbers. Elisabeth also indicated that the Excelsior band program received additional funds from the Booster club in post-COVID norms.

As the band director, Elisabeth understood the importance of symbiosis with the community in which she taught. She has capitalized on stakeholder organizations such as the PTA and Booster club. This was consistent with Isbell (2005). Returning to five instructional periods per week provided Excelsior band program with SE learning opportunities which was consistent with MTSS component of using elective courses to provide SE growth for students (Allbright et al., 2019).

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of one rural middle school band program in North Carolina during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research questions for this study were:

1. How do rural middle school band program stakeholders in North Carolina describe challenges in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do rural middle school band program stakeholders in North Carolina describe benefits in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Emergent themes *Adapting Instructional Approaches*, *Allocating Resources, and SE and MH Responses* and individual codes associated with each theme were presented chronologically throughout four periods of *Pre-COVID Norms, EVI, Plan B, and Post-COVID Norms*. Perceived benefits and challenges related to COVID-19 and rural middle school band were identified and analyzed through a pragmatic lens.

Research Questions and Recommendations

Research Question 1: Challenges

My first research question addressed how rural middle school band program stakeholders in North Carolina described challenges in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. One specific challenge addressed by every stakeholder group throughout EVI, Plan B, and Post-COVID Norms, was the importance of providing SE and MH support.

Stakeholders identified a lack of SE growth opportunities for students who started band in sixth grade during EVI in school year 2020/2021. They referred to using online meetings as a way to provide SE outlets for students, which was consistent with Katzman and Stanton (2020).

However, some students were unable to make new friends and other positive social connections during EVI and Plan B as noted by Elisabeth (Interview 1) and Ava (Interview). Students failed to engage in remote learning due to scheduling conflicts; forgetfulness (Ava, Interview); boredom (Elisabeth, Interview 1); distraction due to cell phones, television, or other websites (Elisabeth, Interviews 1 & 2); or a lack of parental oversight and screen time restrictions (Elisabeth, Interview 2; Muppalla et al., 2023). The feeling of boredom, exclusion, and lack of concentration noted by stakeholders was consistent with Rucsanda et al. (2021).

While the Excelsior LEA and administrators instructed elective teachers to focus on making instructional time fun during EVI, the primary objective seemed to be providing more SE opportunities for students. This is consistent with Allbright et al. (2019) who indicated that use of electives/specials classes to promote SE learning may be ideal for middle schools. It is also consistent with assertions by Clough and Tarr (2021) who indicated that the use of music experiences in the classroom provided opportunities for students to connect with each other. Elisabeth identified he percentage of her students who missed out completely on virtual learning opportunities as a whole, but more specifically, on the intended SE opportunities when she said, "And, there's maybe 30% who just didn't. And some of those didn't come back," (Interview 2). Student musicians were unable to establish bonds of friendship and other relevant, healthy relationships due to learning via virtual instruction during EVI and being forced to social distance and wear masks during music instructional times during Plan B. Some students remained in the VA while Plan B instructional delivery was occurring, so developing relationships among and between VA and Plan B students was difficult, if not impossible. Upon returning to in-person instruction and developing post-COVID norms, Elisabeth noticed SE challenges among the students who had not fully engaged during EVI and Plan B instruction.

Excelsior Middle School band stakeholders indicated mixed experiences with technology. New technology challenges reported by stakeholders included learning the wrong way to hold an instrument due to a lack of in-person correction, poor screen clarity, or student vision impediments. Ava learned to hold her trombone slide improperly due to a lack of hands-on corrective measures that would normally be addressed by a middle school band director. Students did not like the use of SmartMusic as a primary tool for assessment during EVI and Plan B. Andante, however indicated SmartMusic was both functional and fun as it provided him with the ability to perform repertoire he might not have been exposed to otherwise.

Stakeholders described historically low recruiting numbers during school year 2020/2021. While recruiting was a challenge for the sixth-grade cohort during EVI at Excelsior, consistent with Kelly (2021), it was not in post-COVID norms. Retention was problematic for the seventh and eighth grades during EVI and Plan B but was not during post-COVID norms. Recruiting challenges during EVI were likely due to the lack of in-person performance capabilities, parents not wanting to invest in an instrument they were not sure their student would be able to play, and a lack of ability to physically visit the elementary schools to allow the eighth graders to actively recruit rising sixth graders (Elisabeth, Interviews 1 & 2).

Recommendations

I implore politicians, SEA, and LEAs of rural public schools to not only create a wider awareness of SE and MH concerns among rural middle school stakeholders, but also invest in the greatest resources LEAs have available, their stakeholders (Miksza et al., 2022). Hiring additional counselors, LEA partnering with local or even telehealth mental health practitioners and creating dedicated times for SE and MH growth and development could pay dividends for all stakeholders (Miksza et al., 2022; Morales et al., 2020; Palac, 2008). Stakeholders should also

receive instruction related to screen-time appropriateness by age and type of screen time (Muppala et al., 2023).

I am particularly interested in SE and MH data comparisons between rural middle school band stakeholders. In which rural regions or LEAs were stakeholders least impacted by SE and MH concerns, and how have those regions or LEAs mitigated SE and MH challenges for their students? Students in middle school in post-COVID norms display immature behaviors not typical in pre-COVID norms (Elisabeth, Interviews 1 & 2), perhaps related to the SE and MH vacuum sustained throughout the COVID-related EVI and Plan B periods. Interviewees supported the idea that Excelsior could do with more counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other professional SE and MH practitioners. Perhaps a study attempting to identify which characteristics or behaviors exhibited by successful band students during EVI correlate with positive MH factors would be useful. SE and MH data comparisons between rural middle school band stakeholders could provide insight into which grade levels or other demographics may require the most resources in closing the SE and MH gap left behind by COVID. Potentially investigating which rural regions or LEAs were least impacted by SE and MH concerns, and how those regions or LEAs mitigated SE and MH challenges for their students, could be beneficial.

Research into the SE deficit of students in all cohorts affected by COVID-19 is not only warranted, but necessary. A lack of identified best practice related to pandemic EVI and Plan B learning exacerbated SE and MH challenges faced by many stakeholders. Therefore, we should identify best practices for SE growth opportunities during virtual instruction in rural schools in North Carolina and throughout the United States. With a clearly-defined best practice, future interruptions to in-person learning need not be so taxing on student SE growth (Levstek et al, 2021). This recommendation is consistent with Pendharkar's assertion that MTSS, when

implemented properly, may help every student within the school (2023), but may only work online if internet connectivity and educational setting may be appropriately managed.

Identifying ways to keep students engaged in virtual learning scenarios such as EVI and VA may provide stakeholders with talking points from which to encourage parents and guardians to implement changes within their individual homes. Family involvement in the process is, according to stakeholders, an important component, if not the most important component of virtual learning. Stakeholders identified contributing factors including family schedules and at-home learning locations, insistence on limiting non-instructional screen time, and allowing students to become "bored" (Elisabeth, Interview 1) while at home must be team managed so students feel more inclined to learn something new.

VA students received significantly less instructional time and were seemingly prioritized differently than Plan B students. The schedules for Plan B and VA were not conducive to having both school settings function simultaneously or to sharing the same teacher. This was consistent with Kraft et al. who identified similar administrative organizational practices as unfair expectations on the teacher (2021). Identifying successful rural middle school band programs who utilized a combination of VA and Plan B-style instructional delivery methods could benefit band programs during future pandemics, as well as providing students who are, or have family members who are immunocompromised with more equitable opportunities to receive a top-notch music education experience. Multiple case study, phenomenological inquiry, and grounded theory research into rural middle school band programs with the intent to identify best practice related to hybrid instruction is warranted. Specifically, seeking to identify how rural music educators can keep students more engaged in the learning process during virtual instructional periods in rural instrumental music programs. Avoiding a completely virtual setting at all costs

could provide fewer challenges. If virtual instruction in a case such as VA is implemented again, administration should ensure that one music educator is not expected to teach two simultaneous settings, one in-person, and one VA.

Students experienced difficulties with new technologies including Zoom, SmartMusic, and Google Calendar, although the students did receive some direction from Elisabeth on how to navigate the settings within Zoom. Ava (Interview) indicated that Elisabeth's Zoom tutorial was not common among her other teachers, and that even with a tutorial, she somehow still learned some things incorrectly during EVI. These results were consistent with Hash's (2021) assertions that educators were able to incorporate new technologies into their classroom.

Research Question 2: Benefits

My second research question addressed how rural middle school band program stakeholders in North Carolina described benefits in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic Stakeholders cited an increase in overall budget allotted to the band program from the PTA and Booster Club. ESSER fund acquisitions provided Excelsior band with instruments it may have otherwise taken numbers of years to afford (Elisabeth, Interviews 1 & 2).

The Excelsior LEA utilized buses as mobile hotspots for outlying, rural areas fur students, teachers, and administrators to remain connected during EVI and Plan B instruction. The LEA decision to utilize buses as mobile hotspots for student stakeholders likely provided some students with learning opportunities they otherwise might not have had.

Elisabeth changed instructional delivery based upon guidance from administration, available technologies, and chronological period, which was consistent with previous research (Feindler et al., 2019; Hash, 2021), and similar to other music programs in North Carolina (Earnhardt, 2021). She had to be reflective and reflexive to identify the most pragmatic ways of

moving forward through each set of unique challenges presented by the changes between chronological periods. Elisabeth integrated new hardware and software, and touted learning to teach with a microphone as a huge benefit to her personal health. The large number of students she teaches daily and the requirement for her to provide frequent feedback to her students through verbal means initially strained her vocal folds. The decision to mandate sectional times for her students ultimately worked in favor of the entire band program. Elisabeth highlighted student musician successes in the percussion section, particularly.

Elisabeth and Joseph attributed much of the success of student musicians and positive retention numbers to a team mentality. Groups of students emerged as leaders and as support mechanisms for individual student musical growth. This was consistent with Allbright et al. (2019) who indicated that student-led efforts may support buy-in, trust, and inclusion. The sixth-grade cohort 2020/2021 retention rate was the highest Elisabeth could remember, with only fifteen students dropping band over a three-year period. Excelsior band also increased the mean repertoire difficulty level between pre- and post-COVID norms from a I/II split to a II/III split (Elisabeth, Interview 1; NCBA, 2023). This was inconsistent with the 81% of programs that lost members during EVI and Plan B (Kelly, 2021).

EVI provided a break from the pre-COVID norm physical, mental, and emotional stressors for Elisabeth. She indicated some relief when COVID struck, and school closures were announced. “I mean, for me, I was just relieved. I needed a break. It was great. I loved COVID,” (Elisabeth, Interview 1). This statement indicated that Elisabeth was working feverishly to create and maintain a successful band program during pre-COVID norms. Whether that was an expectation from administrators or the result of her own initiative and drive, or some other

reason, Elisabeth's statement may ring true for many secondary instrumental music performance educators.

Recommendations

Music educators might examine the experiences shared with them by other stakeholders in their respective programs to determine which scenarios provided their students with the best opportunities for resilience during traumatic experiences; research into this would also be appropriate. Researchers might explore what encouraged students to practice more, engage more, and generally devote more time to studying music during the pandemic. This might help us discover how to harness the resilience of successful students and improve resilience in other students.

Music educators might also discuss their experiences within their PLCs and attempt to identify similarities among students who were successful during the COVID-19 pandemic. Frank discussion among educators as related to their COVID-19 experiences may also prove beneficial to administrators and teachers as Willis indicated he had not had an opportunity to fully process the entirety of the COVID-19 experience he endured in Excelsior Middle School.

Elisabeth reported overall increase in the funding of the Excelsior band program during post-COVID norms, predominantly from the Booster club. Additionally, ESSER funds were procured by the Excelsior LEA. ESSER funds, while not available to support music education at this time, may be provided in some form during future pandemics. Identification of the steps taken by SEAs and LEAs around North Carolina including the Excelsior LEA may be beneficial to other band programs, specifically in rural areas. Having a documented sequence of events for LEA personnel to follow may encourage a larger quantity of districts to apply for federal funding as it becomes available.

Providing accessible internet connectivity to all stakeholders in rural areas should be prioritized prior to future interruptions to in-person learning. Drones and other hotspot delivery means may be utilized in a similar manner to the buses used by the Excelsior LEA. Drones have the ability to enter more remote areas than buses and me less costly over time than using buses due to fuel and driver costs and geographic distance. Each LEA could develop is own grid of wi-fi access to cover their entire area of operations, or a SEA could take ownership of the wi-fi challenges through satellite or tower placement. A corporate partnership could be made to ensure adequate connectivity for all stakeholders.

Band directors might consider using optional virtual sectional times as potential supplemental instructional practices for their students during post-COVID norms. If stakeholders agree that private lessons may be successfully accomplished via virtual means, then I can see an argument for utilizing the technologies learned during EVI and Plan B could supplement in-person instructional practices. In rural schools with smaller numbers, this may be a more effective route than attempting before or after school rehearsals due to transportation issues if students all have internet connectivity.

While recruiting numbers were low in the 2020/2021 school compared to pre-COVID norms, Elisabeth reported higher retention within that cohort over a three-year period. I recommend investigating what makes certain years of recruiting and retention more successful than others in rural middle school bands, including successful practices during the EVI chronological period. Researching best-practice recruiting efforts in rural middle school band programs identified as successful could prove useful in both post-COVID norms as well as future interruptions to in-person learning.

The physical health, MH, and SE of music educators should be prioritized by not only the individual music educator, but also the administrators and school leaders at every level who are responsible for the well-being of the educators, staff, and students they serve. Elisabeth's statement should also call in to question how much time SEAs and LEAs expect from educators, and more specifically, music educators. Perhaps identifying ideal numbers of student/teacher ratio in secondary music education could be helpful. Additionally, one could only hope to be able to teach their area of teaching certification all day long.

I initially hoped to view data through an intersectional lens as related to both COVID-19 and rural middle school bands in North Carolina. The data did not provide me with a substantive opportunity to do that. I would recommend an intersectional lens analysis for future research related to COVID-19 and rural music education in North Carolina, there may be some relevance in the conclusions of such a study, perhaps even correlation, or identifiable magnitude of the intersectionality of various facets related to COVID-19 and rural middle school bands in North Carolina. Future intersectional research related to rural middle school bands in North Carolina could focus on the SE well-being and MH of stakeholders.

As the research community continues to learn and share more about how COVID-19 has impacted stakeholders from different groups and combinations of stakeholders within households, schools, and communities, and the long-term effects of our choices in terms of policies and procedures during EVI, Plan B, and Post-COVID Norms, more questions may be raised and methodologies identified for attempting to understand the benefits and challenges faced by stakeholders in rural middle school bands in North Carolina. As experiences are not linear in nature, but a phenomenon created by layers of interconnected parts, people, and

activities, I can envision a series of studies in which the interpersonal relationships of band students is studied from both psychological and sociological perspective.

Summary

The Excelsior middle school band program navigated interruptions to in-person educational experiences in rural middle schools well, as described by interviewees, with the exceptions noted. The school as a whole kept student academic success as a secondary focus, with the primary focus being ensuring students were fed, safe, participating in social gatherings as often as practical and possible, and just having some fun. This study contributes to the growing body of literature related to rural music teaching. Identifying best practice and mitigating processes now could provide those experiencing future interruptions to in-person learning with far more guidance than was available to those who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic.

As I am writing the conclusions to this research study, a new strain of COVID is spreading across the United States. I fear that we, as a nation, may make some of the same mistakes we made during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of a lack of SE resource investment. I also fear we have not reached a consensus on what best practice may look like as related to rural school music programs during interruptions to in-person learning. The SE toll of a year and a half of irregular, virtual and hybrid instruction created or exacerbated teaching and learning challenges for teachers and students, household challenges for parents, and administrative challenges for principals and district administrators. I can only hope that each school district in North Carolina kept copious notes on effective practices and policies so that researchers may continue to write their individual stories, and the stories of each school within those districts. I would welcome individual stories from stakeholders from each individual school. I entreat

researchers to continue to identify best practices, and stakeholder SE and MH as related to COVID-19, especially during EVI and Plan B/VA for all spatial-demographic identifications of public schools in North Carolina and throughout the United States.

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APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW ANCHOR QUESTIONS

Band Director

Why did you decide to teach in a rural school district?

Please share any particularly interesting stories or anecdotes about your teaching in a rural school.

To what do you attribute your successes or challenges?

Please describe your experience as a band director here prior to COVID-19.

- Program numbers?
- Retention?
- Recruiting?
- Performances?
- Parent/student contact?
- Parent investment into the program?
- Student participation and buy-in?
- Community relationships?
- Funding?
- Teaching Methodologies?
- Technology?
- Repertoire selection?

How would you describe the impact of COVID-19 on the school?

How would you describe the impact of COVID-19 on the band program at your school?

- Program numbers?
- Retention?
- Recruiting?
- Performances?
- Parent/student contact?
- Parent investment into the program?
- Community relationships?
- Student participation and buy-in?
- Funding?
- Teaching Methodologies?
- Technology?
- Repertoire selection?

What have been your biggest successes during COVID?

To what do you attribute those successes?

What have been your biggest challenges during COVID?

To what do you attribute those challenges?

What kind, if any, of COVID-19-related funding has your program received over the last three years?

What else would you like to share that may be relevant to COVID-19 and its impact on rural middle school bands in North Carolina?

Principal/Administrator

How long have you been associated with this school?

Why did you decide to serve in a rural school district?

What do you like about serving as a principal/administrator in a rural school?

What do you not like about serving as a principal/administrator in a rural school?

Please share any particularly interesting stories or anecdotes about serving as a principal/administrator in a rural school.

To what do you attribute your successes or challenges?

How would you describe your band program prior to COVID 19?

- Program numbers?
- Performances?
- Parent/student contact?
- Parent investment into the program?
- Student participation and buy-in?
- Community relationships?
- Funding?
- District policies and procedures?
- Schoolwide policies and procedures?
- Technology?

How would you describe the impact of COVID-19 on the band program at your school?

- Program numbers?
- Performances?
- Parent/student contact?
- Parent investment into the program?
- Community relationships?
- Student participation and buy-in?
- Funding?
- District policies and procedures?
- School policies and procedures?
- Technology?

What have been your biggest school successes during COVID?

To what do you attribute those successes?

What have been the band's biggest successes during COVID?

To what do you attribute those successes?

What have been your biggest school challenges during COVID?

To what do you attribute those challenges?

What have been the band's biggest challenges during COVID?

What, if any, COVID-19-related funding did your school received since 2020?

How were those funds used by the Band program at your school either directly or indirectly?

What else would you like to share that may be relevant to COVID-19 and its impact on rural middle school bands in North Carolina?

Student

How long did you attend the case middle school?

Were you in the band program for the entire time you were here?

What do/did you like about attending a rural middle school?

What do/did you not like about attending a rural middle school?

Please share any particularly interesting stories or anecdotes about being a band student in a rural school.

To what do you attribute your story successes or challenges?

How would you describe your school prior to COVID?

How would you describe your band prior to COVID?

- Practice time?
- Rehearsals?
- Performances?
- Did you feel connected to your band program?
- Did you feel invested in the band program?
- Community relationships?
- Funding?
- Safety measures?
- Repertoire?
- Technology?

How would you describe the impact of COVID-19 on your school?

How would you describe the impact of COVID-19 on the band program at your school?

- Program numbers?
- Practice time?
- Rehearsals?
- Performances?
- Did you feel connected to your band program?
- Did you feel invested in the band program?
- Community relationships?
- Funding?
- Safety measures?
- Repertoire?
- Technology?

Do you know what a rural school is?

What do you like about your rural middle school?

What do you not like about your rural middle school?

What have been your biggest school successes during COVID?

To what do you attribute those successes?

What have been the band's biggest successes during COVID?

To what do you attribute those successes?

What have been your biggest school challenges during COVID?

To what do you attribute those challenges?

What have been your band's biggest challenges during COVID?

To what do you attribute those challenges?

What kind of instruments or new technology did you notice that may have arrived during the COVID-19 pandemic?

What else would you like to share that may be relevant to COVID-19 and its impact on rural middle school bands in North Carolina?

Parent

How long did your student attend the case middle school?

Were they in the band program for the entire time they were there?

Please share any particularly interesting stories or anecdotes about being a parent of a student in a rural school.

To what do you attribute your story successes or challenges?

What do you like about your student attending a rural middle school?

What do you not like about your student attending a rural middle school?

How would you describe your experiences with the school prior to COVID?

How would you describe your experiences with the band prior to COVID?

Your student's band experience
Your student's Practice time?
Your student's enthusiasm for band?
Your recollection of during or after school rehearsals?
Your recollection of band performances
Did you feel connected to your student's band program?
Did you feel invested in the band program?
Band/Community relationships?
Safety measures?
Communication between school, band, parents, and students?
Technology?
Band Culture?

How would you describe the impact of COVID-19 on the school?

How would you describe the impact of COVID-19 on the band program at your student's school?

Your student's band experience?
Your student's Practice time?
Your student's enthusiasm for band?
Your recollection of during or after school rehearsals?
Your recollection of band performances
Did you feel connected to your student's band program?
Did you feel invested in the band program?

Band/Community relationships?
Safety measures?
Communication between school, band, parents, and students?
Technology?
Band Culture?

What have been your biggest parenting successes regarding the school during COVID?

To what do you attribute those successes?

What have been your biggest parenting successes regarding the band during COVID?

To what do you attribute those successes?

What have been your biggest parenting challenges regarding the school during COVID?

To what do you attribute those challenges?

What have been your biggest parenting challenges regarding the band during COVID?

To what do you attribute those challenges?

What else would you like to share that may be relevant to COVID-19 and its impact on rural middle school bands in North Carolina?

Community Partner

How long have you been associated with the case middle school band program?

In what ways do you support the band program?

Tell me about the band program.

What do you believe are some positive characteristics of rural schools?

Rural school band programs?

What do you believe are some negative characteristics of rural schools?

Rural school band programs?

What do you like about being a community partner with a rural middle school band program?

What do you not like about being a community partner with a rural middle school band program?

Please share any particularly interesting stories or anecdotes about being a community partner with a band in a rural school.

To what do you attribute your story successes or challenges?

How would you describe your partnership with the band prior to COVID and now?

- How the band and the community interacted?
- Public band performances?
- Your recollection of band performance quality?
- Did you feel connected to the band program?
- Did you feel invested in the band program?

How would you describe the impact of COVID-19 on the band program at Excelsior?

- How the band and the community interacted?
- Public band performances?
- Your recollection of band performance quality?
- Did you feel connected to the band program?
- Did you feel invested in the band program?

What else would you like to share that may be relevant to COVID-19 and its impact on rural middle school bands in North Carolina?

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL FOR STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWEES

Request for Stakeholder Participation in Research Study

My name is Zachary D. Wills, and I am a rural middle school band director in North Carolina. I currently teach at Silk Hope School in Chatham County, North Carolina, and I am a Ph.D. candidate at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am conducting a research study on the Impact of COVID-19 on Rural Middle School Bands in North Carolina and am serving as the Primary Investigator in this study.

The purpose of this study is to identify and explore the experience of one rural middle school band program in North Carolina during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research questions include:

1. How do rural middle school band program stakeholders in North Carolina describe challenges in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How do rural middle school band program stakeholders in North Carolina describe benefits in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. How did government programs mitigate any challenges faced as a result of COVID-19?

Study procedures will include semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from the selected case school band program. I am actively seeking interviewees from the following categories of stakeholders from your school: principals, current teachers, band students who were in 8th grade in school year 2021-2022 or 2022-2023, parents of students who were 8th grade band students in school year 2021-2022 or 2022-2023.

If you agree to participate as an interviewee in this study, I would ask you to participate in two, approximately one-hour semi-structured interview sessions scheduled throughout the Summer months during your availability. Interviews would occur at a public location of your choice (public libraries are great meeting places).

No monetary or other compensation is provided for your participation.

Location of the study will be at _____ (to be determined and completed after IRB approval). I, Zachary D. Wills, am the Principal Investigator, and my contact information is zdwills@uncg.edu, and my contact phone number is 210-663-8876. My mentor researcher, Dr. Tami Draves, may be reached via email at tjdraves@uncg.edu. Please feel free to contact me if you wish to be involved in this research study as an interviewee.

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Zachary D. Wills
Ph.D. Candidate, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

APPENDIX C: GLOSSARY OF KEY ACRONYMS

CDC – Center for Disease Control and Prevention

EOC – End-of-Course

EOG – End-of-Grade

ESEA – Elementary and Secondary Education Act

ESSER – Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief

EVI – Emergency Virtual Instruction

LEA – Local Education Agency

MH – Mental Health

MPA – Musical Performance Adjudication

MTSS – Multi-Tiered System of Supports

NCBA – North Carolina Bandmasters Association

NCDHHS – North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services

NCDPI – North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

NCDPITD – North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Transportation Division

OESE – Office of Elementary and Secondary Education

PPE – Personal Protective Equipment

PTA – Parent Teacher Association

REAP – Rural Education Achievement Program

RLIS - Rural and Low-Income School

SE – Social Emotional

SEA – State Education Agency

SRSA – Small, Rural School Achievement

VA – Virtual Academy

WHO – World Health Organization