Improving student achievement: Incorporating weekly individual practice time in the advanced middle school orchestra classroom

by

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A REPORT

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Abstract

The lessons demonstrated in this report are focused on exploring the impact of incorporating student practice time during large ensemble class time in the advanced middle school orchestra. Students have been taking on increasingly numerous activities, family responsibilities, and other pursuits outside the school day and I aim to show that by incorporating one or two "Practice Classes" into the weekly schedule can over time, ultimately benefit student achievement. I have designed these lessons around ideas learned in my Master's studies in the area of human development and cognition, instrument pedagogy, and classroom management. By incorporating these "Practice Classes" into our weekly schedule over the course of 4 months, we were able to learn several pieces of music more difficult than prior. Furthermore, I was able to attend to some of the lowest achieving students' needs and bring their level up drastically as a result. The final aspect was that for a majority of students in my specific classroom they are not able to take their instrument home, for any reason, due to location, size of instrument, family dynamics, homelessness, or transportation.

From the skills learned in the classes mentioned above, I also created handouts with helpful practice tips, reminders, encouraging phrases, and places for students to write short and long-term goals for themselves. By encouraging the students to practice amongst each other, I have seen a great increase in their willingness to let their guard down, speak up for themselves and their engagement during regular large ensemble rehearsals. At the completion of the activity, I interviewed my students and the use of "Practice Classes" effectively eliminated all of those barriers for the students who are affected by them the most and in the case of the highest achievers, they were able to learn more solo literature during their home practice sessions.

Table of Contents

List of Figures v
List of Tables vi
Chapter 1 - Teaching Philosophy 1
Music as a Human Right 1
Practice Club, a Precursor 2
How My Philosophy Informs My Teaching 2
Chapter 2 - Lesson Plans 3
Format and Design of All Lesson Examples 3
Lesson Plan 1 – Practice Class #1 3
Practice Class Plan: 5
Assessment Rubric 7
Lesson Plan 2 – Practice Class #4 8
Practice Class Plan 10
Lesson Plan 3 – Practice Class #12 13
Practice Class Plan 15
Student Exit Interviews 16
Practice Class Reflection 17
Chapter 3 - Reflections 18
Bibliography 21

List of Figures

Figure 2.1. Practice Class #1, Slide 1, Introduction to Practice Class 5
Figure 2.2. Practice Class #1, Slide 2, Justifications and Learning Targets 5
Figure 2.3. Practice Class #1, Slide 3, Music Suggestions and Practicing Tips 6
Figure 2.4. Practice Class #4, Slide 1, Introduction to Practice Class #4 10
Figure 2.5. Practice Class #4, Slide 2, Reiteration of Justification and Learning Targets 10
Figure 2.6. Practice Class #4, Practice Class Strategies and Reflection Worksheet 11
Figure 2.7. Practice Class #4, Slide 3, Music Suggestions and Practicing Tips 12
Figure 2.8. Practice Class #12, Slide 1, Introduction to Final Practice Class 15
Figure 2.9. Practice Class #12, Slide 2, Music Suggestions and Interview Information 15

List of Tables

Table 2.1. Practice Class Assessment Rubric 7
Table 2.2. Student Reported Data from Interviews 16

Chapter 1 - Teaching Philosophy

Teaching Orchestra the past six years in an urban setting has given me many opportunities to see how different elements of our music education processes affect the students' performance in class, mental health, sense of belonging, and their ability to invest in their own education. I have learned that there are many wonderful aspects of music education that benefit all of the above, however I feel that for a majority of the students that I see in my classes, established music education processes can fall a bit short.

Music as a Human Right

My teaching philosophy centers on the belief that music is a right and is essential to be human. This musical right consists of appropriate, high quality, and relevant materials; education that is significant and equitable; belonging to an inclusive community with meaningful and regular performance opportunities, and the authentic recognition and validation of achievements.

Students come to school to learn and have many opportunities to engage in various electives, activities, and clubs. If a student comes to my orchestra class, I feel I should help them to the best of my ability. Often this results in financial leniency or waiving fees on my part for students that cannot afford instruments, supplies, t-shirts, lunch while on a trip, or festival entrances. However, one sticking point kept creeping up the past four or so years, practicing. My immediate response would have been to assume that students did not want to practice, but I was made aware that they were barred from bringing their instrument home, for any reason, ever. To my dismay after calling home and trying my best to encourage these adults to allow their student to practice, they would not be able to make it work. What came up repeatedly was the overall safety of their neighborhood, and how the instrument could be broken, destroyed, stolen, or make their child a target for an altercation. Keeping the instrument at school was their way of

mitigating any of those possibilities and ensuring that their child had an instrument for class. What was I to do? What would anyone do in this instance? I began thinking of alternatives to class structure, and potentially offering an after school club for practicing.

Practice Club, a Precursor

Practice Club was born, and on every Tuesday and Thursday of Fall 2024, students began coming after school from three to four P.M. At first, I was not sure how to run the club, but a loose structure was developing and students were consistently attending. My challenges included student motivation, lack of focus, and unstructured practicing; all of these problems will come back in the report. The hardest challenge however, was myself: letting the students have time and space to make mistakes unburdened by me. I offered supervision from a building perspective, but for many of the first weeks, students played for an hour and left. Eventually I began to offer short student-requested coaching sessions, but I made sure the students knew that the time was for them to work. The students that came to Practice Club began showing more success in class and confidence in their playing; however, there were still several students in class left behind. I began developing worksheets for students to use for Practice Club and saw their success in that environment. I concluded that it could be an interesting idea to bring Practice Club into class.

How My Philosophy Informs My Teaching

My Philosophy guides my teaching through accepting and understanding of the difficult barriers students face and what I can do to remedy them. The relinquishment of direct control of the entire class to the process of personal practice. Development, compilation, instruction, and refinement of the exercises and lessons. Continuing to offer one-on-one coaching opportunities during the lesson. Finally, the careful maintenance of student achievement and morale.

Chapter 2 - Lesson Plans

Format and Design of All Lesson Examples

The following three examples of lesson plans have been chosen at the beginning, near middle, and end of the Practice Class unit. The lesson plans and slides shown are based around school suggested formats. I have found the best use of the slideshows in my daily instruction include the classroom procedures: setup, tuning, attendance, and other announcements. After the procedures slide, I will use the next slide to rehearsal plans and objectives, or other unit objectives.

Lesson Plan 1 – Practice Class #1

I designed this lesson to accomplish a few tasks: Reviewing rows and columns classroom layout, introducing the topic of Practice Class, the justifications and learning targets for the unit, and to offer the students starting point suggestions and tips for success. In the days leading up to the unit my students began showing eagerness towards the Practice Class unit and I was excited to see the outcomes. Even with the stated learning objectives and targets, my personal goal for this lesson was a successful transition into a new class format with little to no behavior issues, as well as the positives results we should see by having the entire class practice.

Thursday, March 27, 2025 Robinson Middle School Advanced Orchestra – 7th Hour

National Music Standards (2014):

Performing: Analyze: MU:Pr4.2.E.5a Demonstrate, using music reading skills where appropriate, how knowledge of formal aspects in musical works inform prepared or improvised performances.

Performing: Rehearse, Evaluate, Refine: MU:Pr5.3.E.8a Develop strategies to address technical challenges in a varied repertoire of music and evaluate their success using feedback from ensemble peers and other sources to refine performances.

Setup: Preset Chairs in Rows and Columns facing toward projection screen

Prior Knowledge and Skills: Students comfortable with our normal classroom procedures, basic instrument and reading abilities for their level, and have had an introduction to the music.

Goal: Instruct students on what Practice Class is, a simple practice technique, what realistic goal they will set for this practice session, and time to work towards that goal.

Relevant Contextual Factors and Modifications Needed: Several students are practicing at the same time in the room; some students moved to practice and locker rooms for isolation to mitigate extreme overstimulation. Several high-caliber players outfitted with practice mutes to dampen their excessive volume, while allowing them to practice at full strength.

Instructional Materials, Resources, and Technologies: Projection board, Instruments, Practice mutes for various instruments, and Isaac's arrangement of Symphony 12 by Mozart (1984), Zoo Folk Suite by Norman Ward (1991), Celtic Air and Dance by Michael Sweeney (2007), and Songs of the Sea by Bob Matthews (1999).

Practice Class Plan:

(Preset, 5 minutes) Show and Discuss Practice Class introductory slides. Red and yellow boxes describe student tasks to be completed prior to Tuning and Attendance.

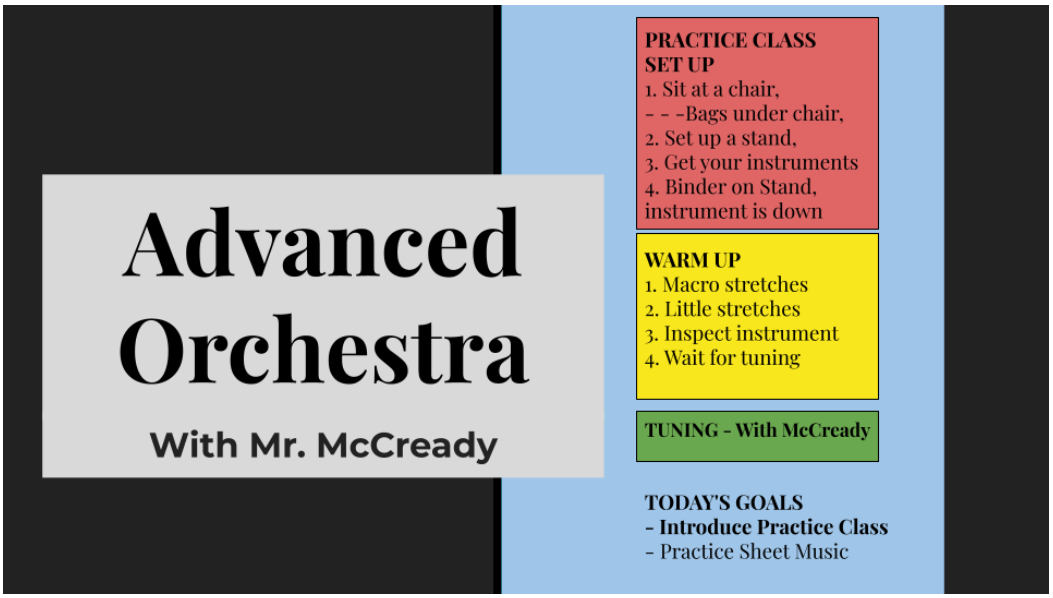

Figure 2.1. Practice Class #1, Slide 1, Introduction to Practice Class

(7 min) Present slide 2, allow time for students to read, and discuss shortly with students.

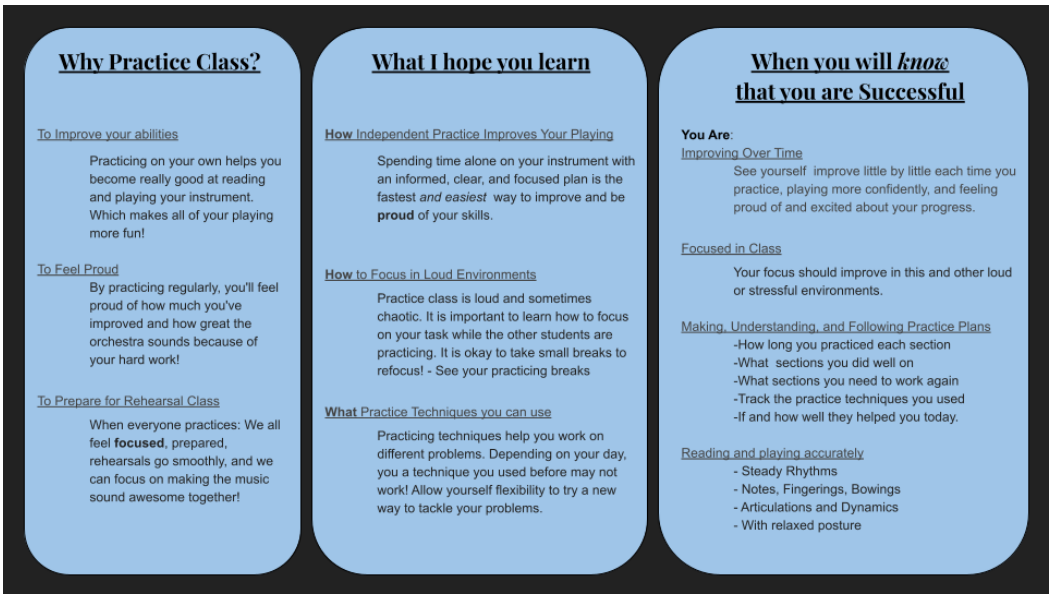

Figure 2.2. Practice Class #1, Slide 2, Justifications and Learning Targets

(7+ min) Present slide3, students read and discuss the goals for the next practice sessions.

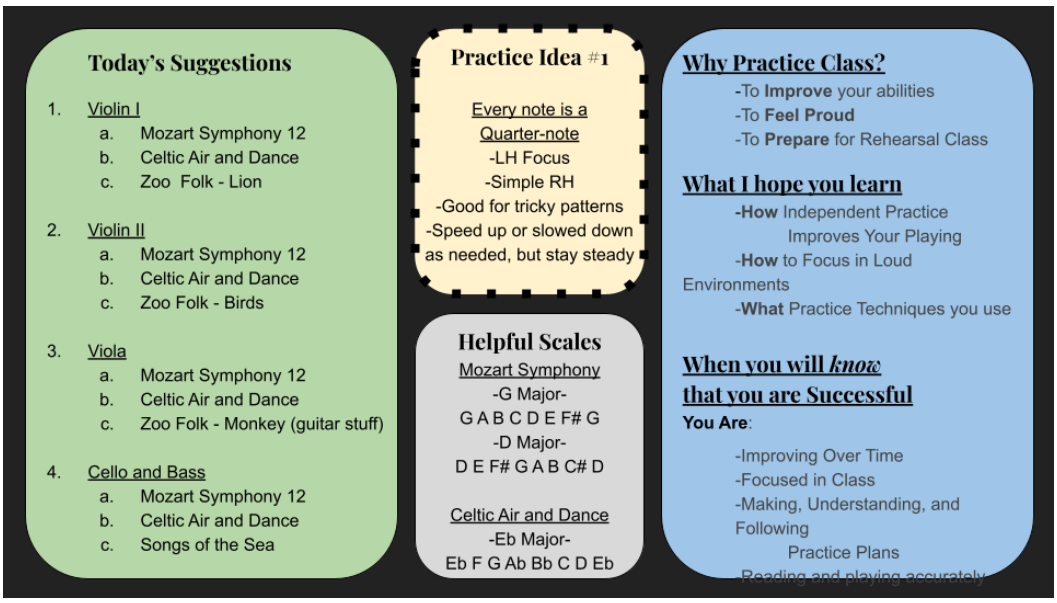

Figure 2.3. Practice Class #1, Slide 3, Music Suggestions and Practicing Tips

a. Review Song Priority suggestion for each instrument

   i. Students previously given instruction to mark difficult sections in each song for upcoming playing tests

   ii. Students have total freedom of choice to play any song or section they wish based on their own personal abilities and factors.

b. Demonstrate the practice idea of the day

   i. #1 "Every note is a quarter note"

   ii. Play passage with all notes being the same value, discuss the merits and encourage use in practice session

c. Highlight Major scales on slide they may use in the most difficult songs

d. Justification and Learning targets are simplified and retained

Students given the remainder of class to practice - 4 minutes needed for pack up

Assessment Rubric

4 – Proficient 3 – Adequate 2 – Needs Improvement 1-Poor or no demonstration given

Preparation and Materials	4	All materials present; well-prepared and ready to go
	3	Most materials present; prepared, delayed start
	2	Some materials missing or unprepared, very delayed
	1	No materials, very unprepared, excessively delayed
Focus and Effort	4	Full focused; uses time wisely with clear intent
	3	Mostly focused, minimal redirection, great effort
	2	Easily distracted; several redirections, inconsistent effort
	1	Unfocused, disengaged, or no effort
Technique and Accuracy	4	Practices with attention to technique, posture, and accuracy.
	3	Some attention to accuracy and technique.
	2	Frequent errors; little attention to form.
	1	No attempt to correct mistakes.
Goals and Reflections	4	Identifies a specific goal and reflects on progress thoughtfully.
	3	Has a goal and reflects briefly on the session
	2	Unclear goal; minimal reflection
	1	No goal or reflection shown
Mindset and Attitude	4	Positive attitude; open to feedback and self-improvement
	3	Neutral attitude; Accepts feedback and shows willingness to improve
	2	Negative attitude; Resistant to feedback or
	1	Disruptive and or unwilling to participate

Table 2.1. Practice Class Assessment Rubric

Lesson Plan 2 – Practice Class #4

The next lesson presented here follows a few days of Practice Classes where the topic had been introduced; however similar to the previous discussion about Practice Club, it had become clear that for many of students they needed more structure during their practicing. I modified a worksheet from Practice Club with the hopes that giving students a place to set specific goals and use that to inform their practice plan for that day. Additionally I included a clear menu of practice techniques they would feel more likely to use different approaches to the challenges in their music. The worksheet concluded with an area for reflection on the practice session. At the end of the lesson, I would collect each practice technique worksheet and hold on to them until the next Practice Class to inform their next session. I would ultimately collect all practice class worksheets and distribute them back at the conclusion of the entire unit.

Tuesday, April 8th, 2025 Robinson Middle School Advanced Orchestra – 7th Hour

National Music Standards (2014):

Performing: Analyze: MU:Pr4.2.E.5a Demonstrate, using music reading skills where appropriate, how knowledge of formal aspects in musical works inform prepared or improvised performances.

Performing: Rehearse, Evaluate, Refine: MU:Pr5.3.E.8a Develop strategies to address technical challenges in a varied repertoire of music and evaluate their success using feedback from ensemble peers and other sources to refine performances.

Setup: Preset Chairs in Rows and Columns facing toward projection screen

Prior Knowledge and Skills: Students comfortable with our normal classroom procedures, basic instrument and reading abilities for their level, and have had an introduction to the music. Students have now completed three Practice Classes, one every Tuesday and Thursday.

Goal: Review what Practice Class is, Introduce practice techniques and reflection worksheet, what realistic goal they will set for this practice session, and time to work towards that goal.

Relevant Contextual Factors and Modifications Needed: Students are practicing at the same time in the room; some students moved to practice and locker rooms to mitigate overstimulation. High-caliber players outfitted with practice mutes to dampen their excessive volume, while allowing them to practice at full strength.

Instructional Materials, Resources, and Technologies: Practice Techniques and Reflection Worksheet, Projection board, Instruments, Practice mutes, and sheet music: Isaac's arrangement of Symphony 12 by Mozart (1984), Zoo Folk Suite by Norman Ward (1991), Celtic Air and Dance by Michael Sweeney (2007), and Songs of the Sea by Bob Matthews (1999).

Practice Class Plan

(Preset, 5 minutes) Continuation of previous lesson format.

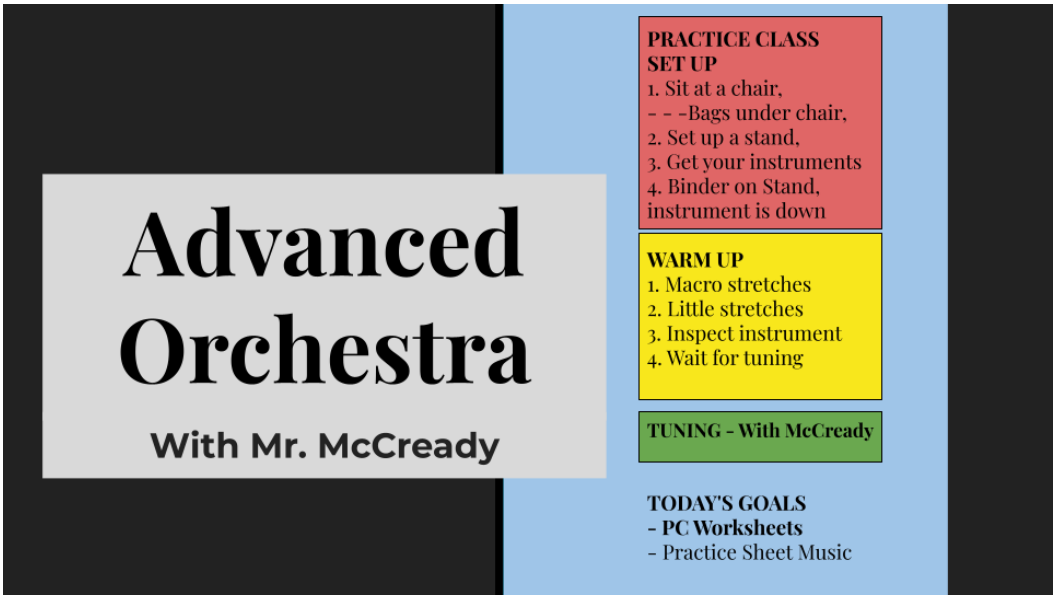

Figure 2.4. Practice Class #4, Slide 1, Introduction to Practice Class #4

(1 – 2 min) Present slide 2

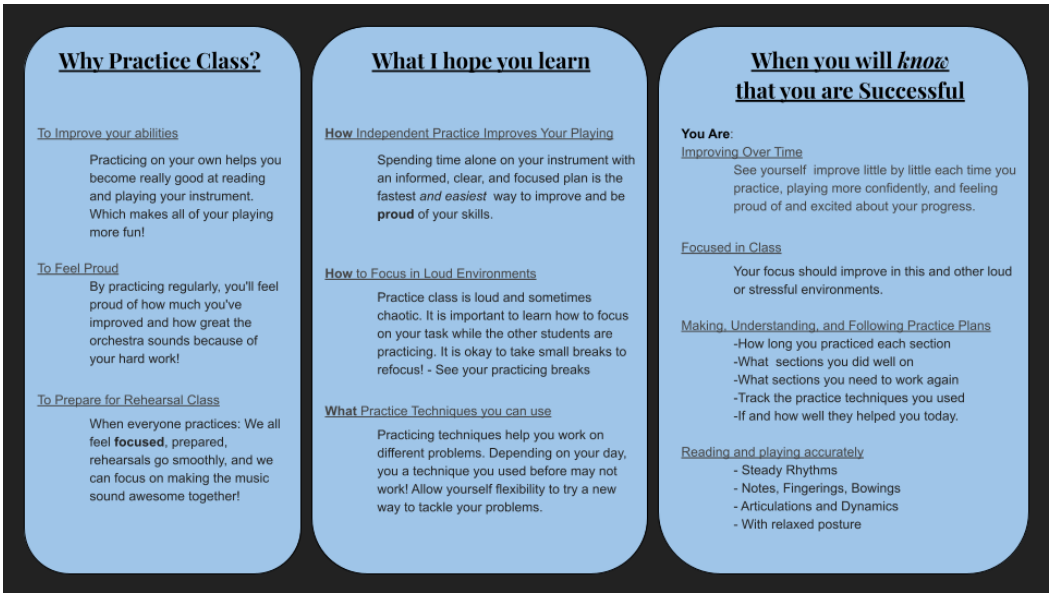

Figure 2.5. Practice Class #4, Slide 2, Reiteration of Justification and Learning Targets

(10 min) Slide 3 and Discuss Strategies and Reflection Worksheet

PRACTICE CLASS STRATEGIES AND REFLECTIONS

NAME: DATE:

DIRECTIONS: Fill out this form Before, During, and After Practice Class

BEFORE PRACTICE

Select Musical Goals to focus on for today: *Only select what you can realistically accomplish!*

[ ] Notes and Rhythms	[ ] Slurs, String Crossings, and Bowing Style
[ ] Fingerings and Shifts	[ ] Articulations and Dynamics
[ ] Vibrato	[ ] Playing in time with a metronome

Make a Plan, What Song(s) or section(s) will you work on today? Be Specific

Song 1:

(Song 2)

(Song 3)

What are you doing well?

What problems do you have while practicing? How can you address them?

DURING PRACTICE: CHECK USED STRATEGIES

Strategy Name	√ YES	√ NO	Strategy Name	√ YES	√ NO
1 Every Note is a Quarter Note			11 LH Only Finger Taps		
2 Every Note is Long-Short, Dotted Half – Quarter			12 LH Only, RH Pizzicato		
3 Every Note is Short-Long Quarter – Dotted Half			13 RH Only (bow open strings)		
4 Slow-Mo – Half speed or less – Metronome!			14 Play with an earbud drone		
5 Add-a-note, forwards			15 Play from memory		
6 Add-a-note, backwards (read it forwards)			16 Add measure rest between		
7 Add-a-Measure, Forwards			17 Metronome only on One		
8 Add-a-Measure, Backwards			18 Metronome every *other* one		
9 Looping Measure or Section, Increase Speed			19 Metronome on 2, 3, or 4		
10 Looping Measure of Section, Decrease Speed			20 Entire Piece, no mistakes		

AFTER PRACTICE – REFLECTIONS

Did you meet your goal?

What Practice Strategy worked the **best** for you? Why?

On a scale from 0 to 4 how do you think you have improved from last practice class? (none) 0 1 2 3 4 (a lot)

How do you think the orchestra has improved since last practice class? (none) 0 1 2 3 4 (a lot)

Figure 2.6. Practice Class #4, Practice Class Strategies and Reflection Worksheet

Source of Inspiration for worksheet (Hart, 2014)

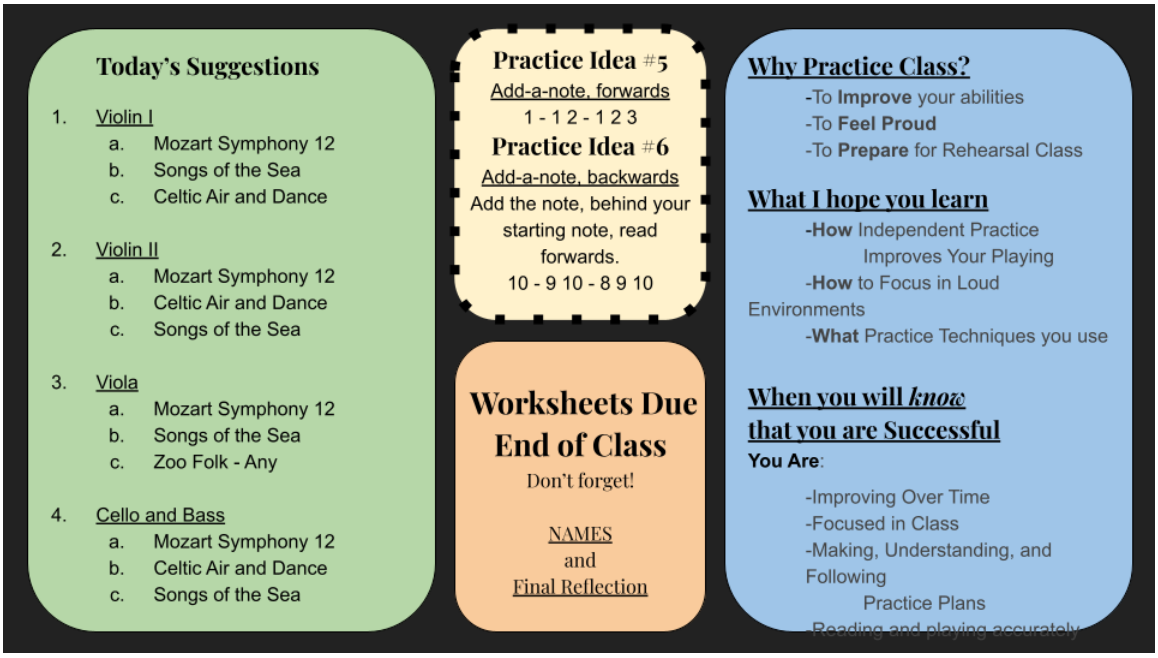

Figure 2.7. Practice Class #4, Slide 3, Music Suggestions and Practicing Tips

Lesson Plan 3 – Practice Class #12

The final lesson for this unit was developed out of a desire to conclude the Practice Class unit as well, hand back practice worksheets, and interview students exploring specific student challenges to practicing. Leading up to the last lesson I did an informal poll of the students to see if they would be interested in doing interviews rather than a worksheet and it was very encouraging to see almost every hand raise. At the beginning of the lesson, I would hand back the collection of their practice techniques and reflection worksheets in the hopes of reviewing them after the final concert. During this lesson, I had students sign up for interviews, at their time I would call them my office and ask a series of interview questions about: Their housing situation, practice frequency and if no practice, what the reasoning was, as well as whether Practice Class has been effective, and if they would want it to continue next year. By using student interviews, I was hoping to get a sense of their challenges through their voice rather an adult or a friend.

Thursday, May 8th, 2025 Robinson Middle School Advanced Orchestra – 7th Hour

National Music Standards (2014):

Performing: Analyze: MU:Pr4.2.E.5a Demonstrate, using music reading skills where appropriate, how knowledge of formal aspects in musical works inform prepared or improvised performances.

Performing: Rehearse, Evaluate, Refine: MU:Pr5.3.E.8a Develop strategies to address technical challenges in a varied repertoire of music and evaluate their success using feedback from ensemble peers and other sources to refine performances.

Setup: Preset Chairs in Rows and Columns facing toward projection screen

Prior Knowledge and Skills: Students comfortable with our normal classroom procedures, basic instrument and reading abilities for their level, and have had an introduction to the music. Students have now completed eleven Practice Classes, one every Tuesday and Thursday.

Goal: Discuss Practice Class, hand back practice techniques and reflection worksheets, Interview students about their experience, and have time to work on anything they need.

Relevant Contextual Factors and Modifications Needed: Several students are practicing at the same time in the room; some students moved to practice and locker rooms for isolation to mitigate extreme overstimulation. Several high-caliber players outfitted with practice mutes to dampen their excessive volume, while allowing them to practice at full strength.

Instructional Materials, Resources, and Technologies: Practice Techniques and Reflection Worksheet, Projection board, Instruments, Practice mutes for various instruments, and sheet music: Isaac's Arrangement of Symphony 12 by Mozart (1984), Zoo Folk Suite by Norman Ward (1991), Celtic Air and Dance by Michael Sweeney (2007), and Songs of the Sea by Bob Matthews (1999).

Practice Class Plan

(Preset, 5 min) Slide 1

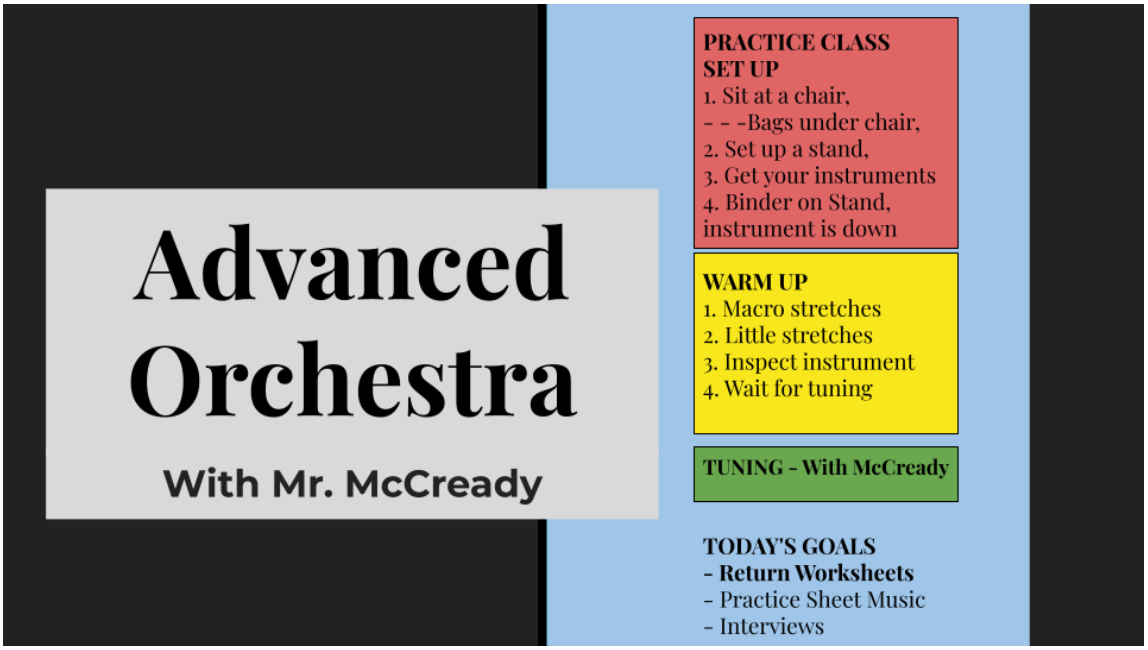

Figure 2.8. Practice Class #12, Slide 1, Introduction to Final Practice Class

Slide 2 up the rest of the hour

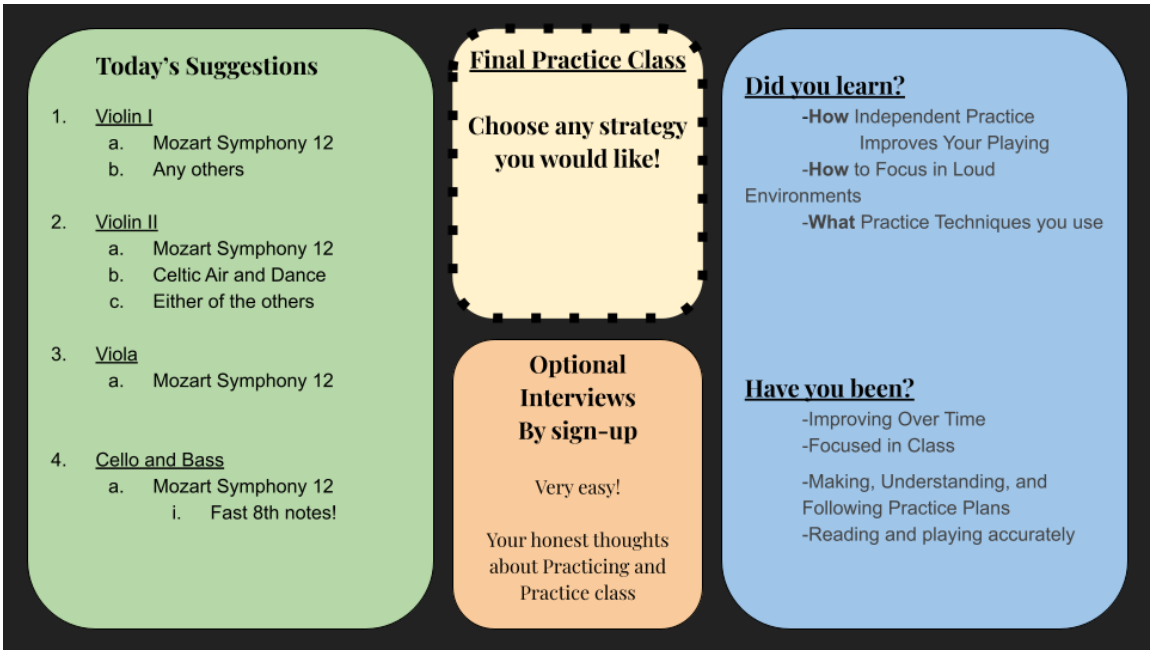

Figure 2.9. Practice Class #12, Slide 2, Music Suggestions and Interview Information

Student Exit Interviews

I conducted five student interviews across a variety of backgrounds to gather their honest opinions of Practice Class and other topics. The questions were given to the students directly before the interview to allow them time to process how they would like to answer. Questions consisted of their Age, instrument, their current living situation and composition, their home practice frequency and if any barriers keeping them from practicing, if they thought Practice Class had been helpful and why, and finally if they would recommend Practice Class be a normal part of orchestra and if so, what frequency felt best to them.

Student	Gender	Instrument	Grade	Housing	Home Practice
1	Female	Violin	8th	House	Yes, Often
2	Female	Cello	8th	House	Not allowed, Walking through a dangerous area of town
3	Female	Bass	6th	Unhoused	Never, difficulties of being unhoused
4	Male	Violin	7th	Apartment	Never, limited space, shares bedroom with two younger brothers
5	Male	Violin	8th	Trailer Home	Not allowed, history of multiple burglaries.

Table 2.2. Student Reported Data from Interviews

The end of the interview asked them to reflect on the Practice Class unit. All five students reported they thought Practice Class helped them understand how to practice, gain confidence in their playing, had improved their playing, and would recommend keeping it as a staple part of orchestra class next year. The data collected highlighted the situational factors each of the five students face in regards to their ability to practice at home. Futhermore, students expressed a positive response to the Practice Class not only in terms of their individual growth, but also in how it benefited the orchestra as a whole.

Practice Class Reflection

My overarching goals with these lessons were to drive student achievement through the relaxing of a traditionally strict ensemble schedule and help define the components of practicing and ways they may practice on their own. By eliminating the practice requirement, I saw much more than just technical abilities growing. When students were able to focus and truly work hard they began to see the success, they had desired at the beginning of their playing journey. I had one of my toughest students, who I was sure would give up in High School; finally click about what it means to practice, and that she *was* developing skills! All because she finally had the ability to sit down and work on it without me leading the ensemble rehearsal.

One of the absolute hardest aspects that I alluded to earlier in the report was giving up control of the class to the process of personal practice. The first few days of chaotic practicing and behaviors flaring up, seemed to be a death nail in the project, however I was able to pull a worksheet together and steer the students' practice in a much more healthy and consistent manner. By relinquishing my own control and trusting in my students desire to learn, I was able work one-on-one with so many of the students who had unknowingly missed important steps on their string journey, but did not want to speak up during ensemble rehearsal. Relatively simple things like fully explaining extensions on Cello, or how to get a better tone on Bass, things I would have liked to think I would have caught regardless, but I am not so sure.

I enjoyed seeing the students take on and flourish with the hardest songs they have ever played at the final concert. The celebration after the concert featured numerous families and students congratulating me on the concert, but most were emphasizing my willingness to allow the student's time to practice during class. I would love to alter my practice sheet for next year and I will wait to hand back until I make copies of the student data.

Chapter 3 - Reflections

My thoughts about teaching have certainly changed throughout my studies in the Music Education Masters' Program at Kansas State University. There has been many topics, much discourse, and theories covered over the three summers, but I know precisely where to begin. Dr. Payne was able to help me understand and enjoy the Theories of Music Teaching Course. In my undergraduate degree, I was not thrilled with all of the different theories and how they are seen in the various types of educational styles. I suffered in that class and was put off from learning theories for years until I had the fortune to learn about Critical Pedagogy. The principles of Critical Pedagogy are essential to my teaching style:

1. Education is a conversation where students and their teachers pose and solve problems together
2. Education broadens the student's view of reality
3. Education is empowering and that knowledge includes a new understanding and an ability to act on that knowledge to affect a change
4. Education is transformative for both teachers and students
5. Education is political. The issues of power and control and that those that use critical pedagogy are able to transcend beyond to focus on the valuable knowledge students bring to the classroom. (Payne, 2024)

I have enjoyed the lessons of orchestra specific topics as well, Upper and Lower String Pedagogies, as well as Literature Analysis and Organization and Administration of an Orchestra program. The skills that I learned in the string pedagogy classes have begun to pay dividends in my classrooms, specifically in the areas of Upper strings. The Upper String Pedagogy class was

a struggle for me due to being a low strings person, but also that I had a harmful mental image of my violin playing that was quickly dissuaded during our in-person classes and lessons.

Some of the most engaging conversations I had was in Dr. Dirks' Org. and Admin. Class, learning about what it means to be inclusive when it comes to cultures, styles, and how to represent them authentically in my classroom and beyond. When I select any music now I make sure to have done my due diligence to vet the composer, arranger, and the work itself, before ever handing out to my classroom. Furthermore, I was encouraged to change my seating practices by trying to rotate through the section, but also within all of the violins. I am happy to say that I have fully implemented this at my schools and saw great success. At the end of this Master's degree, I feel more connected and invested in my profession, as well as my current position, and at the end of every summer I cannot wait to take what I have learned into my classrooms. I have immense gratitude towards my numerous friends and colleagues gained through this process, as well as being inspired by those around me to push towards greater heights in all of my endeavors.

Finally, one lesson I have most definitely gravitated towards is that of Compassionate teaching strategies, expressly the stripping of needless barriers to music, and ensuring I am providing equitable access to all students. I was so thrilled that I had finally found a title for what I was trying to describe in my teaching and beliefs:

> I am personally grateful to let go of the unrealistic and unfair expectation that I have to be perfect – something a leader has to model when demanding it of everyone else. I can instead focus on exploring a variety of means for optimal and authentic expression. This is where compassion comes in. By making space for diverse musics, learning styles, and pedagogical approaches, we shift our attention away from exacting external standards

> and move toward shared music-making with others whom, despite their usually younger age and lesser experience in certain areas, we recognize to be equal to us in the collective place we call humanity. (Hendricks, 2018, pp.2-3)

I am happy to report that through the implementation of gained from this program I have: boosted numbers in all of my ensembles; received the first two "I" ratings at State High-School Large group in 20 years; retained and graduated exponentially more seniors every year, designed and implemented an annual collaborative high-school concert series for my school district; successfully planned, funded, and navigated a High School Orchestra trip to Chicago, and brought back the first Symphony Orchestra in my district to my high-school. However, my time at Kansas State has taught me the most important part of my position has been to create and foster a culture of young people who commit, work hard, support each other and the community, as well as leaving the orchestra program better than the program they entered.

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