

# Music education practices in school marching bands: an analysis based on the narratives of their former members

#### MODALIDADE: COMUNICAÇÃO

#### SUBÁREA: Educação Musical

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**Abstract**. This article is the result of a master's research that investigated the perceptions and experiences of ten former members of school marching bands in the city of João Pessoa (PB) (SILVA, 2020). Narrative interviews were applied and, as a complementary source of information, semi-structured interviews. Thus, the former members revealed subjective aspects of their respective musical training courses in the bands in which they participated. The reports were categorized, cross-checked, analyzed and interpreted based on bibliographic references from the areas of Education and Music Education. This study discusses excerpts from the testimonies of the subjects that approach the routine of rehearsals in school bands and the practices in school bands need to be rethought in order to promote a more participative, active, creative and open music education to diversity.

Keywords. School marching bands, Music Education, Former members, Musical practices.

# Práticas de educação musical em bandas marciais escolares: uma análise a partir das narrativas de seus ex-integrantes

**Resumo**. Este artigo é resultado de uma pesquisa de mestrado que investigou as percepções e as experiências de dez ex-integrantes de bandas marciais escolares da cidade de João Pessoa (PB) (SILVA, 2020). Foram aplicadas entrevistas narrativas e, como complemento de informação, entrevistas semiestruturadas. Dessa maneira, os ex-integrantes revelaram aspectos subjetivos de seus respectivos percursos de formação musical nas bandas em que participaram. Os relatos foram categorizados, entrecruzados, analisados e interpretados com base em referenciais bibliográficos das áreas da Educação e Educação Musical. Este estudo discute trechos dos depoimentos dos sujeitos que abordam a rotina de ensaios nas bandas escolares e as práticas de ensino de música nesses espaços. Conclui-se que as práticas educativas em bandas escolares precisam ser repensadas de modo a promover uma educação musical mais participativa, ativa, criativa e aberta à diversidade.

Palavras-chave. Bandas marciais escolares, Educação musical, Ex-integrantes, Práticas musicais.

## Introduction

The marching bands are ensembles composed of instruments of the brass section – trumpets, horns, trombones, euphonia, tubas, etc. – and percussion one – snares, cymbals, tenor

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drums, bass drums, and others. They perform a repertoire consisting of civic marches, popular music, erudite pieces and film themes, for example, being able to participate in several daily events: parades, openings, concerts, competitions, and others. (LIMA, 2007, p. 41; SILVA, 2012, p. 34). When they are inserted in the school context, they can provide access to music education to several students who would not be able to buy a musical instrument or pay for private music lessons.

This article presents the results of a qualitative research of master's degree developed in the Graduate Program in Music at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB) whose objective was to investigate the perceptions and experiences of former members of school marching bands – who did not follow higher or professional studies or career in music – regarding their music education paths (SILVA, 2020, p. 16)<sup>2</sup>. In this way, testimonies were collected from ten former members of school marching bands from the city of João Pessoa (PB) through narrative interviews – guided by Gibbs (2009) and Flick (2004) – and, as a source of complementary data, a second semi-structured interview.

All subjects participating in this research are men,<sup>3</sup> older than 18 years, residents of João Pessoa, with a minimum participation of one school year in bands. In addition, only former members who left the bands less than five years before the data collection period were interviewed<sup>4</sup>. In this way, we consider that former members who have left the bands for longer tend to romanticize and idealize their reported experiences, compromising the problematizing and reflective proposal of this investigation. Nine subjects are former members of school marching bands of the municipal public basic education of João Pessoa, and only one of them is graduated from a private basic school band.

The reports of the subjects were categorized, compared, cross-checked and analyzed based on a bibliographic review of the areas of Education and Music Education in order to understand the meanings of their participation in school marching bands. The research reveals that school bands are spaces that can contribute to the training of their students, enabling social interactions, acquisition of values, possibility of visiting other places through the trips and presentations they promote, access to musical learning and other aspects that are present in their

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Data collection took place between 05/20/2019 and 10/17/2019. Former members who had left the band before 2014 were not part of this research.





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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> It was not a requirement that all subjects interviewed were men. However, this reflects the male predominance in the bands for their military origin. For further discussion, check Fontes (2019).



lives even when they become former members. However, the testimonies of the subjects also show us some limits in the educational and musical practices adopted in these groups with regard to the routine of rehearsals, the predominance of Western music notation and misunderstandings in the musical instrument teaching.

# **Routine of rehearsals**

In their reports, the former members revealed some aspects related to the routine of rehearsals and studies in the school marching bands in which they participated. In this way, Subject 5 - 20 years old, apprentice administrative assistant – reveals:

I devoted myself too much! My mother just didn't tell me to take my clothes to school because I studied in the morning and the rehearsal was at 11:45 am to 1:00 pm. As soon as the classes was over, we were in rehearsal. When we finished, we would go home for lunch and, at three o'clock, we would come back to school again to learn sheet music. At five o'clock, another rehearsal started. We stayed from 5:00 pm to 7:00 pm and we didn't get home until 7:30 pm. When we were in the final week, near the state championship, we rehearsed until 9:00 pm. There were days when the principal allowed us to go to the computer room. We rehearsed each instrument in sections: trumpet, trombone, another day euphonium and tubas together. And so... I enjoyed that time. (S5-I1, 06/12/2019)<sup>5</sup>.

In the same direction, Subject 6 - 25 years old, student of civil engineering – reports how the divisions of days and schedules of rehearsals occurred in the band in which he participated:

The band's rehearsals were divided like this: they happened three days a week. One of them was only theory and the other was rehearsal and study of technique related to the instrument. The other day, it was a dress rehearsal with everyone in the band to rehearse the songs. (S6-I2, 08/05/2019).

As we can see in the above reports, there is a flexibilization of schedules and days of school bands' rehearsals, although they usually occur in the opposite period to the student's regular classes or on the weekends. Depending on the proximity of some presentation – parades or championships, for example –, the rehearsals can be intensified, requiring commitment and dedication. In addition, the reports from subjects 5 and 6 show us that the rehearsals are usually divided into groups in order to prepare the band members for the dress rehearsals.

Based on my experience as a student and then as a conductor of bands in João Pessoa, I was able to see that the days and schedules of classes and rehearsals in the bands depend on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The indication refers to the subject number (S), the interview number (I) and the date (month/day/year) on which it was collected, respectively. In addition, we chose to present the subjects' speeches in italics in order to differentiate them from bibliographic citations.







the school management guidelines and the teaching concepts and availability of the conductor. They are not guided by an educational legislation or specific curriculum document for the teaching of music in these spaces. Thus, teaching in João Pessoa's school bands is not based on bimesters, such as formal education. However, it is based on the beginning and the end date of the regular school year for the development of its activities. Their musical practices are strongly influenced by the calendar of commemorative dates – Mother's Day, Saint John's Day, Independence Day, Christmas, etc. – which, in turn, influence the rehearsal time and the choice of repertoire. In this way, it is possible to think that the school marching bands of João Pessoa have characteristics of non-formal education pointed out by authors such as Costa (2014, p. 437), Ghanem (2008, p. 62) and Trilla (2008, p. 35-39): flexible schedules, few laws that regulate them, outside the formal hierarchical system, lower qualification requirements for professionals working on the project, and others.

In addition, Almeida (2005, p. 52) and Simson, Park and Fernandes (2001, p. 10) point out that the participation in non-formal education projects is voluntary and not mandatory. In this way, Subject 1 - 19 years old, military army – reveals that the lack of attendance is something that occurs in school bands: "At 3 o'clock, we scheduled a rehearsal. Someone was going? No, man, because they didn't want to improve the band. It's difficult to be a conductor. It's a lot of heads thinking of different things". (S1-I2, 05/27/2019).

Although participation in non-formal education projects such as João Pessoa's school bands is voluntary, it is necessary to establish a control of the attendance of the rehearsals in order to accompany students who really demonstrate interest and dedication. Many groups in Brazil have suffered from the scarcity of funds and materials: lack of instruments, uniforms, maintenance material, etc. In that way, it would not be fair to keep a student who does not participate assiduously, taking the place of another one who is interested in participating in the band.

The rules, days and times of participation in the band need to be pedagogically planned and explicit to the students and their guardians still in the enrollment period, supporting the organization of the activity and avoiding constraints and unjust exclusions. In addition, the conductor needs to assume an open attitude to dialogue in order to listen and understand the feelings, desires and difficulties of the students.

Monotonous, repetitive and uncreative teaching practices can lead to situations of stress and dissatisfaction among band members. In this sense, Subject 9 - 20 years old, in search of employment – reports:







The young person is there in the rehearsal and the conductor is demanding, demanding and demanding. There comes a time when the person doesn't like it. The person feels bad. The person, young, does not like to get stressed out and goes away [...]. We were playing the same mistake. The conductor got stressed and we were stressed too. Everyone was stressed and it wasn't good. He was like, "That's how it is, that's how it is". We tried to do it and we couldn't do it. (S9-I2, 08/29/2019).

In the same direction, Subject 10 - 18 years old, high school student – says:

All day at school, all day at school! It was the same thing all the time. It was too repetitive! A theory class was coming. After the theory, the instrumental practice came right away. I was stressed with theory, then to play and to see if it'll work. I was without peace anyway. (S10-I2, 10/17/2019).

These reports show us that, generally, band teaching is based on the practice of repetition. However, this procedure, adopted by many conductors, makes rehearsals monotonous, tedious and uninteresting, not encompassing other musical activities that promote a more creative and, therefore, musical and expressive teaching (MILLS, 2007, p. 13; PENNA, 2015, p. 27; PENNA et al, 2016, p. 46-48; SWANWICK, 2003, p. 39). In addition, band conductors tend to teach as they were taught, adopting repetitive practices without further reflection. In this way, the teaching of music in school bands is sometimes tied to traditional patterns and models of musical formation little focused on the development of musicality and expressiveness (PENNA et al, 2016, p. 46-51).

Whitener (2014, p. 1-3) points out that the teaching in marching bands is usually centered on the conductor and the acquisition of performance skills with the aim of preparing a repertoire to be presented. Such learning rarely encompasses the development of creative and expressive skills – listen, appreciate, create, reflect, for example –, and situations of analysis and understanding of the repertoire adopted in its historical, social, cultural and aesthetic dimensions. Thus, the teaching of music in school bands often focuses on the performance excellence with the aim of gaining titles, prestige and social recognition, while ignoring a more comprehensive and reflective music education, broad in aesthetics and methodologies.

It is necessary to highlight that the instability of employment contracts for working as a conductor in the school bands of João Pessoa makes many of them submissive to the pressures of their managers, principals and coordinators for immediate results<sup>6</sup>. It is possible to think that this scenario of instability reflects the lack of creative practices in bands, since many conductors

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The conductors of João Pessoa's school marching bands are hired temporarily. The contracts are unstable. They can be canceled at any time and often depend on political favors. For further discussion, Nóbrega (2018, p. 82, 83).







need to fulfill the wishes of those who hired them in order to ensure their permanence in the job.

Freire (2020, p. 79-101) defends the overcoming of the content-based educational practices, based on the verticalization of relations between teacher – authority that transfers knowledge – and students – passive, "containers to be filled". This author advocates a liberating, problematizing and dialogic education, in which teachers and students are active and participatory agents of the educational process. An education that enables the development of critical thinking and that stimulates creativity, reflection and the transformation of the human being on the reality. In this direction, Allsup and Benedict (2008, p. 161, 169) point out that the conductor, as an educator, needs to promote spaces for reflection and criticism. In this way, it is possible that music education in school bands collaborates in the formation of active, creative, reflective, critical and engaged citizens in the cultural and musical context in which they belong.

## **Predominance of Western music notation**

About the organization of the contents taught in the school bands, some subjects' testimonies reveal that sometimes there is an overvaluation of music theory and instrumental technique as a preparation and requirement for the practice classes and rehearsals. As an example of these questions, Subject 6 reveals:

When I joined in the band, I spent about six months just studying theory and technique. So, in the first year, the band played only one song, but everyone was balanced, both in practice and in theory. We used the theory and the studies of instrumental to make everyone play the song correctly in the dress rehearsal. (S6-I2, 08/05/2019 - our emphasis).

In the same direction, Subject 8 - 20 years old, student of administration and theology - says:

The theory classes, at the beginning of the school year, were from the first to the second month of marching band time. After the instrumental rehearsals started, we stopped the theory and started playing and playing. The band rehearsals were always after the regular classes. (S8-I2, 08/23/2019).

The above reports reveal a separation between music theory and instrumental practice classes. In the conceptions of some conductors, the students need, first, to attend the theoretical classes for a weeks or months to be prepared to have contact with the chosen instrument<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> This attitude adopted by some conductors cannot be generalized. From my experience in bands, it was possible to notice that some groups do not use Western music notation in their practices, opting for other ways of making music, such as "playing by ear", for example.







However, such practice can contribute to the abandonment of many students due the long time required for contact the musical instrument and a possible encounter of meaning in the band (CHAGAS; LUCAS, 2014, p. 6, 7; CRUZ, 2019, p. 94). From this perspective, Mills (2007, p. 13) argues that it is not natural for a code to be learned before the activity can take place. Learning to read sheet music before doing music is like learning to write and then to speak. Many students have their expectations frustrated, because they do not find meaning in music theory classes that distance themselves from instrumental practice and musical discourse.

The teaching in bands is, several times, focused on the domain of the reading of sheet music and the basic rudiments of the instrument, without worrying about musical expression (COSTA, 2008, p. 35). In this regard, Pereira (2014, p. 94) points out that music education often uses conservative teaching models as a reference. This "habitus conservatorial"<sup>8</sup> is a historical and ethnocentric construction that hierarchizes musical practices and reinforces the exclusivity of contents considered "indispensable" to the learning of music – such as the reading of sheet music, for example – and the hegemony of certain repertoires, usually the European erudite one<sup>9</sup> (PEREIRA, 2014, p. 94). In this sense, Penna (2015, p. 51-56) warns us about the creation of equivocal representations that delegitimize various musical practices that do not depend on conventional Western notation.

It is necessary to clarify that **this article does not intend to condemn the teaching of sheet music in music education**. Traditional music notation has contributed to the bands' advancement in their performances, as they may include more complex arrangements in their repertoire. In this sense, we can imagine the difficulty of students who do not read sheet music in memorizing long pieces that require a diversity of performance and interpretive questions – articulation, dynamics, modulation, phrasing, etc. In addition, the absence of teaching sheet music reading can be an obstacle for students to continue their musical studies. From this perspective, Subject 9 points out his reasons for not pursuing a possible musical career:

I don't aim to work [with music] precisely because I don't know sheet music. It frustrated me. How am I going to get into a music college if I don't read

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The Subjects interviewed revealed in their statements that the school marching bands of João Pessoa tend not to vary their repertoire, preferring to imitate or "copy" each other. In this way, some subjects pointed out that this posture makes the events monotonous and repetitive. In addition, it was mentioned the valorization of a repertoire of marches and songs from USA to the detriment of Brazilian musical manifestations (SILVA, 2020, p. 139-141).





<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> *Habitus* is a concept formalized by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) who considers that the way we think and act are historical and social constructions that, in turn, are also responsible for the maintenance of *habitus*. In this way, we structure the society at the same time that it structures us. The term "habitus conservatorial", presented and discussed by Pereira (2014), consists of values and attitudes incorporated by society throughout history, which validate musical knowledge and practices of music teaching that had origins in conservatories.



sheet music? Everyone who goes to music class knows that. This makes me stop for good. I decided to stop because of this. If I knew [read sheet music], I would have continued. (S9-I1, 08/27/2019).

The testimony of Subject 9 showed us that the teaching of reading music notation needs to compose the knowledge to be approached in the school bands, **but should not be the only one**. Even at a basic/introductory level, the teaching of sheet music reading in the school bands can collaborate so that students seek other specific spaces for the development of such skill – conservatories, music schools, private lessons and others possibilities. It can collaborate for the continuity of their respective musical life paths and a possible professionalization in the area. However, music classes in basic education – and here I include the school marching bands – cannot be limited to a mechanical training without expressiveness. In this way, school marching bands need to promote different ways of relating to music, where the students can listen, reflect, compose, perform, express thoughts and feelings (MILLS, 2007, p. 13; PENNA, 2015, p. 27; SWANWICK, 2003, p. 58). In this sense, it is necessary that the band conductors assume a posture of self-reflection and questioning about their practices and approaches when they are teaching music.

## Misunderstandings about teaching the instrument

In addition to the issues discussed previously, the testimonies of the subjects reveal the presence of misconceptions regarding the teaching of instruments in school marching bands. Thus, Subject 1 points out that he was guided by his teachers to put a "cloth" or a "ball" inside the bell of his instrument in order to improve the air flow and sound projection. He says:

The conductor said that playing the tuba takes a lot of breathing. The color guard teacher said, "I'll make you play the tuba. No one will listen to the band. They'll just hear you play". We used to put a bed sheet or a ball as if it were a mute inside the bell. He told me to do it and I was dizzy playing like that. (S1-I1, 05/20/2019).

In the same direction, Subject 5 points out that his teacher recommended him the use of a cloth inserted in the bell, in order to improve the lip resistance and the sonority. He says:

The teacher gave me exercises to make my sound better. He said that if I put a cloth in the trombone's bell and kept playing, my sound would improve and I would gain stamina on my lips. Cool! I put a cloth on the trombone to improve my sound. When I took it off, I already saw my sound different. (S5-I1, 06/12/2019).

The testimonies above show us that despite the valuation of performance to the detriment of pedagogical and creative aspects – discussed here –, the teaching of instruments







in school marching bands is sometimes surrounded by misunderstandings. Thus, even if the subjects consider that the practice of putting a "cloth" or a "ball" in the bell of their instruments can help them in their performances, there are no researches that validate such belief. On the contrary, it is necessary to consider that the instrument industry performs several tests with professional musicians in order to develop equipment of higher quality and that take into account issues such as: timbre, air flow, tuning, comfort and others. Although students do not have the financial conditions to acquire a quality equipment, we cannot encourage practices that could lead to future health and performance losses. In addition, there are several exercises developed by professors of wind instruments that can help students in the control of air flow, resistance of the lips, quality and sound projection, and other issues.

In this way, it is necessary that continuous training courses are offered to the conductors in order to promote a better orientation regarding the pedagogical and performative processes in the school band. Lectures and pedagogical meetings with professors specialized in the instruments used by marching bands and with music educators are essential to promote discussions, reflections and advances in the music education processes that occur in these groups.

#### Conclusion

The interviews in two stages were essential to the development of this study, since they allowed listening and analyzing the subjects' experiences and perceptions about their musical training paths in school bands. In this way, Penna (2021, p. 9, 10) points out that narrative interviews are propitious to the development of investigations that seek to understand subjective aspects and events experienced by several persons. It is necessary to highlight that, due to the qualitative character of this study, the reports of the subjects cannot be generalized. However, the excerpts from his speeches presented and analyzed in this paper can instigate relevant discussions to Music Education.

As discussed, the testimonies of the subjects show us that the school marching bands in which the former members participated presented characteristics of non-formal education: no mandatory participation, flexible schedules, no retention in the case of non-assiduities, etc. In addition, it was possible to notice the adoption of musical practices that are not very creative and that separate music theory classes from teaching and learning instruments. These practices, usually repetitive, can be tedious and monotonous, driving students away from the band. In this sense, it is necessary that music education promotes concrete experiences with music in its aesthetic integrality, and not only approaching isolated elements. Thus, the conception of music







theory as a prerequisite for the practice of the instrument can make students feel discouraged and find no meaning in the school band.

Traditional Western music notation has collaborated in the technical and performance development of the bands, favoring the execution of repertoires and more complex arrangements that can be motivating elements for students to remain in the band due to the challenges proposed. Furthermore, not teaching sheet music in the band can lead to abandonment and withdrawal from a possible future professional career in music. In this way, the teaching of sheet music reading is important content for the bands, but **it should not be the only one**. In this sense, it is necessary that the school band is thought as a space that promotes musical initiation, enabling rich social and musical experiences to its students, including proposals for alternative music notation creation, for example.

It is fundamental that the conductors assume a reflexive and a self-analysis posture of their practices in order to promote an active, participatory, bold music education, based on the creativity, experimentation, appreciation and dialogue with the diversity. At this point, it is worth highlighting the need for continuing training courses offered to these professionals with the aim of demystifying misunderstandings about the teaching of the instrument and stimulating debates and reflections about music education in these spaces. In this sense, it is hoped that this paper can collaborate in the conception of a music education in school bands as a dialogic, participatory, reflective, creative praxis opened to diversity.

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