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Teacher interview reflection 2

In this interview I spoke to Matthew Benner who was the high school band director of one of my best friends Caroline Zhu who lived in Maryland. Matthew Benner teaches at Beaufort High School in South Carolina teaching band, Guitar and piano class, music and technology, and songwriting classes. Needless to say, he is a very multifaceted music educator throwing his hat into every ring.

Here are the notes I took during the interview: **Dynamic Curriculum Approach:** Benner underscores the necessity of designing curriculum based on student strengths and weaknesses. By integrating complex meter compositions into performance classes, he can target specific rhythmic skills and help students improve systematically. This shows a deep understanding of how curriculum can be both enjoyable and educational when directed towards the students' needs. **Coping with Stress in Teaching:** The pressures that come with teaching, especially in a rebuilding band program, are significant. Benner's approach to coping with stress, such as engaging in curling, highlights the importance of maintaining balance and self-care for educators to prevent burnout, ultimately benefiting both the teacher and the students. **Understanding Student Contexts:** Benner's acknowledgment of varying student backgrounds—from affluent environments in Maryland to a more impoverished context in South Carolina—sheds light on the greater responsibility educators have in accommodating and understanding their students' lives. This insight is essential for crafting tailored educational experiences. **Significance of Interpersonal Relationships:** Building connections with students is key to fostering a positive classroom environment. Benner encourages open communication and understanding that

behavior often stems from background experiences, advocating for an empathetic approach to teaching that leaves room for students' personal growth. **Effective Recruitment Practices:** The conversation points to proactive recruitment strategies that can include engaging with feeder schools to help potential students understand the value of joining music programs. This means creating informative and inspiring outreach programs that lay the groundwork for a student's musical journey. **Adapting Lessons:** Benner discusses the frequent need to adapt lessons based on student performance, emphasizing the need for effective assessment strategies in real time. This ability to pivot and reshape lesson goals based on classroom dynamics illustrates the adaptive nature of quality teaching. **Mentorship and Impact:** The most rewarding aspect of teaching, according to Benner, is witnessing students grow, not just in skill but in their appreciation of music. His recounting of students who initially demonstrated indifference, later becoming passionate musicians exemplifies the long-lasting impact at the heart of music education.

When I asked about his curriculum designing, he always chooses his rep to help push his students. He talks about a specific example of how his band has had issues in the past with performing pieces in complex meters, so he has introduced a piece to help push them to a point where they can perform this activity. This is how he designs the performance based classes like band. Where as his music technology classes he focus more on completing the tasks first and foremost. In his technology classes he doesn't focus on the actual musical aspects of it because his students are less likely to be coming from a place where they are informed about music theory or performance. He structures the class to introduce musical concepts, first he introduces sound design with making a radio podcast project, then he pushes it to introduce music ideas like chords and scales. Getting his students to a point where they can become comfortable writing music and inspiring them to become more involved.

I asked about his biggest stressors, knowing that he is a very busy teacher, he has a lot of curriculums to balance. He is currently in a program that is in the process of rebuilding, so he has to do a lot of stuff every single day to make sure his music programs are developing. He shows up early, the faculty sees that, and they ask him to do more tasks. His best way of dealing with stress as an educator is to take time away from work and do something completely different. He was super into curling when he was in Maryland, but has shifted that since he has moved to South Carolina he has had to shift it to other things like playing video games or just hanging out with his friends. Its super important to have a good work life balance and important to not take the work to your life or the other way around.

I asked about how the change from schools was. He revealed to me that there was a very different environment. Like I mentioned earlier he went into a school in the middle of a rebuilding process for the music program. In Maryland he didn't really have to worry about the students' instruments and a lot of them had private lesson teachers. Ironically he receives more funding at his new school, however he has to use more of it on his students. Another difference is that the home environments of his students are different. He relayed this story about how one of his top players couldn't make a concert because both of their parents were working and someone had to take care of her brother. Its not a good or bad thing, its just something different he has had to deal with.

Continuing forward with this, Benner described the importance of the interpersonal relationships he has with this students, he likes to build connections with his students so that classroom management becomes so much easier. He knows if the kids are just having a bad day, or if they are just not into the music. He is an expert of getting to know his students and who they

are so he can meet them where they are and get them into a spot where they are able to take on these musical concepts from a better spot.

I asked about how he recruits for all of his classes and he told me that he benefits greatly by interacting with feeder schools to help show his possible students what the environment of his classroom is like.

Going back to lesson planning. I asked him how he goes about this. He actually almost directly reflects the “where are we going, how do we get there and how do we get there” that we are taught in 286. To teach from an end goal in mind, and find out how to get your students there. He reflects, goes “where are we right now” and does a checklist of things they are succeeding in and not living up to. He makes the warmups reflect the issues that they face in the music, and asks them to do a kind of assessment of this, such as when he will make them write the rhythms out and makes them play it in a different exercise. He is a big fan of decontextualizing the music, improving it, and recontextualizing it within the music. “Can you prove that you understand this” I asked what he does when something goes wrong, and he broke it down into two different categories. Things going wrong in the moment and long term goals going wrong. He talks about how a lot of experience just helps with this, knowing “why did this go wrong” in his more mature group he asks them to assess themselves, and if they aren’t at that level yet, he does a lot of the recontextualizing of it. He wants to at least salvage and potentially improve the music in the short term. With long term issues he always asks “what did I say that wasn’t understood” asking if there are other ways to teach whether its different learning modalities, or even down to simple phrasing issues. He checks in with his students to make sure that they are keeping up with him. He believes in stepping back and saying “where do my preparation go wrong, and where

did it go right” taking something that they know and do well and understand, and transferring it over to the different area where they might be having this new issue.

Finally I asked him about advice he would give to me as I become one step closer to becoming a music educator. He said “be genuine to yourself” your true self goes miles in teaching. The second bit of advice he gave me was “don’t take yourself too seriously” He talked about how when he teaches middle schoolers, he tries to take moments to be funny where he uses gen alpha slang to help keep them relaxed and laugh. He really believes in having fun with your students because it really goes a long way in their music making them more confident and comfortable to make errors where you can fix these issues. He ends on this very important note, saying “you can’t save everybody.” he describes his experiences with students who don’t care, are there because they have to be, and despite trying to make connections with them and everything, there will always be students who are resistant to everything you will do to help them. He brings up that a lot of future educators don’t think about this, but he also brings up that this is also not an excuse to stop trying. Never ever stop trying to help them, but its on them to accept the help you give them. He talks about how there are teachers that he has encountered who beat themselves up over their students who are like this, saying “if you tried, you did all you could.”