

# 8:2 A Ratio, a Concept, a Pathway to Improving Beginning Band Instruction

**Dr. Russ Teweleit**

“Did you practice last night?”

Have you ever regretted asking a student that question? Truthfully, this is a question that is often better off avoided. If Timmy is asked this question just after playing “Twinkle-Twinkle” better than it has ever been played in the history of beginning band and answers “yes,” are we not giving the class the false impression that one night of practicing pays instant dividends? Conversely, a boastful “no” would be the worst possible answer. As musicians and teachers, we all understand the need for individual practice. The act of practicing is a process and not a product. It’s more like a slow cooker than a microwave, more like a marathon than a fifty-yard dash. In short, it is much like real life. Consistent work over a long period of time is the ONLY reliable pathway to success. Regrettably, as teachers, the reality is that a sizeable number of our students do not practice anywhere near as much as we would like. The first year of instruction is the most critical as it is when habits—both good and bad—are formed. That is why it is so vital that the director make the most of the available time during class.

## Persistent Insistence

Let’s face it. Most teachers say the right things; however, the very best teachers are those who are great motivators and absolutely INSIST that the students actually do what they expect. We should strive to hold the highest of expectations for our students.

Your students are capable of learning whatever YOU are capable of teaching them. One of the greatest pedagogues of our time, Marcia Zoffuto, asserted that the key is “persistent insistence.” She

explained that there should be no limits placed on learning/performance and that, “persistently monitoring and insistently guiding based on time-honored principles yields a good harvest of knowledge.” Adding, “Insistently encouraging and persistently applying a fair system of rewards and consequences provides learning environment security.” It is important to evaluate your own teaching and determine your level of persistent insistence.

## Playing Ratio of 8:2

It almost seems too simple, but the single best way to learn to play an instrument is to simply do it. If one accepts that premise, it is essential that the teacher make the best use of the students’ time in class. A suggested goal would be

to have **8** minutes of playing time/active music making to every **2** minutes of instruction. This is a very aggressive goal and one that is difficult to achieve; however, in a typical 50-minute class, ten minutes of

instruction should be more than an adequate amount of time to explain any concept. Anything more than ten minutes is likely to be far less effective and possibly even counterproductive.

Philip Farkas, one of the most highly regarded teachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, states in his book *The Art of Horn Playing* that he thinks the three factors that have the greatest impact on student achievement are repetition, constant intelligent analysis, and correct instruction. Of these, he suggests that the most

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important of these is repetition. In *Instrumental Music Pedagogy: Teaching Techniques for School Band and Orchestra Directors*, Daniel L. Kohut explains that we learn by imitation and repetition through trial and error. Unfortunately, instrumental teachers are often too quick to offer further explanation and spend an inordinate amount of time providing instruction when it would be much more effective to simply provide more imitation, repetition, and trial and error.

As teachers, it is essential that we start our classes on time and make the most of every minute of the class period. It is important to teach the students how

to practice and to consistently stress the importance of daily practice outside of class. Simple pragmatism, however, requires the teacher to constantly explore ways to motivate their students to practice all the while utilizing every minute of rehearsal time as if the students do not practice at all. All too often, despite the teacher's best efforts, many students will not chose to practice daily; therefore, if the director does not make the most of the available time, student progress is slow. The following is offered as an illustration of two imaginary beginning instrumental classes:

### Making the Most of the Time Available: A Comparison

School A	Time Wasted	School B	Time Wasted
<b>Start:</b>		<b>Start:</b>	
2-3 minutes after the bell rings.	2 minutes	Class Starts when the bell rings.	0
<b>Announcements &amp; Counting:</b>		<b>Announcements &amp; Counting:</b>	
The class listens to announcements and then works on counting rhythms as a group.		The class begins split and announcements are typed and given to each teacher.	
Classes split for team-teaching:	2 minutes	Classes begin split:	0
<b>Daily Chair Test:</b>		<b>Daily Chair Test:</b>	
Students change chairs following chair test.	2 minutes	Students write down chair number in their book and sit in the new chair at the start of the next class period.	0
<b>Playing to Instruction Ratio:</b>		<b>Playing to Instruction Ratio:</b>	
6:4 6 minutes of playing to every 4 minutes of instruction.	2+ minutes	8:2 8 minutes of playing to every 2 minutes of instruction.	0
Class stops too early and students wait by the door for the bell to ring.	2 minutes	Class stops on time without any wasted time.	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>10 minutes</b>		<b>0 minutes</b>

In a typical school year, the students at School B above will play their instruments:

50 minutes more per week	or	1 entire class period per week
200 minutes more per month	or	4 entire class periods per month
1800 minutes per year	or	36 entire class periods per year

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### The Result:

Even with quality teaching at each school, the students at school B will end the year with almost two months more playing time. When you consider that these students have only been playing for nine months, this is an extremely significant amount of valuable playing. Truthfully, many teachers have the ratio reversed. That is, **2** minutes of playing time to every **8** minutes of instruction! In which case the disparity between the two classes would be light-years apart. There would be no comparison.

### Benefits

In addition to increased student learning, the use of an **8:2** playing to instruction ratio can also lead to improve classroom management. If the pace of instruction is on track, and there is ample imitation, repetition, and trial and error, the teacher will likely find that there is a sharp decrease in the need for corrections in regard to student behavior.

### What can you do?

Examine your own teaching and look for ways to increase your students playing time. Even a few minutes per day can increase their playing time by weeks over the course of a year. Again, set your goal at the ratio of **8:2**. Eight minutes of playing to every two minutes of instruction. It is a simple concept that can yield astounding results.

### References

Farkas, P. (1956). *The Art of Horn Playing*.





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