

The Alexander Technique in Marching Band Instruction: A Literature Review and Future Research Agenda

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Abstract

Ensuring that its members exhibit/demonstrate/utilize a tension-free, relaxed posture is fundamental to marching band instruction. The Alexander Technique is a common technique used to help musicians relax and improve awareness, but at the time of composing this study, no research has been found implementing the Alexander Technique within the context of the marching band.

This study reports a comprehensive literature review regarding the utilization of the Alexander Technique for instrumentalists and compares its concepts to common forms of tension in a marching band, including instrument carriage and horn angles. Findings suggest the teaching of concepts from the Alexander Technique would be effective if implemented in marching band instruction. This study provides rationale and techniques to assist directors to find more approaches to teaching marching band posture and technique in a healthy way. It is encouraged for further studies and discussions to apply these Alexander Technique concepts to marching band instruction and record its impact on the health, performance, and attention of a marching band.

Introduction

Finding more ways to improve the marching band's ease of movement and execution is one of the priorities of a marching band instructor. One such possibility is implementing the Alexander Technique into marching band instruction. There are numerous marching fundamental handbooks and publications produced by and for band directors across the country. The Alexander Technique is an approach that helps us perform physically demanding and everyday tasks. There are several studies focusing on the utilization of the Alexander Technique for musicians in a stationary position, as well as for athletes. Many of these studies explore the Technique's benefits, including tension reduction, improved kinesthetic awareness, and treatment and prevention of injury. Unequivocally, these are all important features marching band instructors intend to teach in marching band fundamentals.

A study building the connections between the physical demands of a marching band and the teachings of the Alexander Technique is important for several reasons. First, building these connections can improve the instruction of marching bands. By providing an evidence-based method, marching instructors will have more objective explanations. Second, because marching band is a physically demanding activity, injuries can occur and are more prevalent than one may expect. This affects many of the thousands engaged in this activity. The Alexander Technique can be used as an effective method to prevent and even help recover from injuries.

This literature study explores and analyzes the potential ways in which the Alexander Technique can be utilized in marching band instruction through examination of empirical evidence related to the Alexander Technique and marching band technique.

Methods

For this study, sources connecting the Alexander Technique and marching band were searched for. The search process included databases, EBSCOhost and ProQuest, and Google Scholar. However, there were no studies found connecting the two together. This led to exploring each topic separately in an effort to connect the two together.

On the one hand, numerous marching band manuals, handouts, and instructional videos describing marching band technique were searched for on the Internet, utilizing Google Search. Since every marching band teaches and approaches marching technique differently, collecting a variety of sources in marching band technique allows for commonalities in the approaches to be identified and referenced. On the other hand, peer-reviewed sources in the Alexander Technique were analyzed, viewing the Technique's basics and benefits. This is to gain an understanding on how the Technique works.

Findings in Marching Band

Marching Band	Link to Access	Words for posture	Words for Inst. Carriage	Words for Chin/Instr. Angle
Kent State University Marching Golden Flashes	https://www-s3-live.kent.edu/s3fs-root/s3fs-public/file/KSUMGF%20Marching%20Fundamentals%20Handbook%202018%20%28Small%29.pdf	Stretch the upper body upward	Instr. held 6° from body; Don't lean backward or forward	10° above parallel
Centrall Michigan University Chippewa Marching Band	https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpOx34B9u1OXKo-yedWPNpTgOSgwebsTR	Separate upper body from lower body	Maintain proper posture	10° above parallel
Pennsylvania State Blue Band	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUXdZ1PNv8	Separate upper body from lower body	N/A	N/A
University of Wisconsin Marching Band	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Fxi6hJ3pM	Straight line through body	N/A	Up/lifted
Ohio State University	https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/u.osu.edu/dist/e/56385/files/2017/11/Marching-Fundamentals-1-pb82ou.pdf	As tall as you can be	N/A	Up/lifted
Clark Cougar Band	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14UNpuwdAEg	Stretch the upper body upward. Stand up straight/tall. As tall as you can be	N/A	10° above parallel
Unknown	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0deNPhigP8	Stand up straight/tall	N/A	Up/lifted
Unknown	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pystXz-oYKZg	Stand up straight/tall	N/A	Parallel to ground
Davis High Marching Band	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKIY-7Nn4g	Chest out	Shoulders help support	10° above parallel
Hebron High School Marching Band	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-N8uocXUmize	N/A	N/A	N/A
University of New Hampshire	https://unhbands.org/docs/cities-FundamentalsHandout.pdf	Stretch the upper body upward	Instr. held 10° from body (horns down)	10° above parallel
McNeese State University	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxXvYTRynXY4t-7s	Stand up straight/tall, As tall as you can be	Muscles will build over time	Up/lifted
United Spirit Association	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1EE01pf2cV4	Stretch the upper body upward	N/A	Slightly above parallel
University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign	https://www.midwestclinic.org/downloads?type=clinic&src=c8ba1f67-17f3-4659-b1be-ddc4d665e188.pdf	Stretch the upper body upward	Maintain proper posture	Up/lifted

Application

Posture

One of the greatest focuses in the Alexander Technique is posture. In order to improve posture in a marching band the three concepts of *Primary Control*, *Body Mapping*, and *Directing* can be applied.

The instructor can refer to *Primary Control*, reminding the band of the head-neck-back relationship to maintain. An instruction like “stand up straight” is open to interpretation. In fact, the marcher may unknowingly exert unnecessary tension in order to meet this directive. Frequent reminders to “free the neck” will help reduce tension in the neck.

Body Mapping is another concept that can be applied to posture. However, it would be best to have the instructor or someone trusted to ensure that the marching band members are accurate in their posture when *Body Mapping*. Essentially, the marchers will imagine and map out their entire body, especially the muscles that are at work for standing at attention. This will take time to develop, but may lead to consistently strong posture.

The concept of *Directing* may also be applied here, having the marching band think of their spine extending “up,” without actually “trying hard.” The idea of “trying hard” may create more tension in the body.

When it comes to combating shoulder tension, *Body Mapping* and *Directing* also come in handy. Kleinman and Buckoke incredibly describes how to reduce tension in the shoulders:

You can body map your arms and shoulders... ‘Direct’ your shoulders away from each other. Opposition in Direction deepens the effect. Direct your elbows away from your shoulders (and your shoulders away from your elbows) and your wrists away from your elbows (and elbows away from your wrists). It is good to get a sense of your arms full of connected energy right to your fingertips... Do not try to get a result, simply notice what is happening. If you soften your hands and tune to the texture of your clothes, as your abdomen moves as you breathe you can feel the changing shape of your hands and fingers. It is useful to be aware of the eight bones of the wrist and the nineteen bones in the fingers and thumb being free to move.

Having the marching band focus on this description may help reduce the tension in the shoulders. Much more helpful than simply saying, “relax the shoulders.”

Findings in The Alexander Technique

In Judith Kleinman and Peter Buckoke's book, *The Alexander Technique for Musicians*, *Primary Control* is defined as “The relationship between the head and the rest of the body... Some Alexander teachers refer to the Primary Control as the head-neck-back relationship.” In essence, this relationship affects the “entire self's body”. Pedro de Alcantara's *Indirect Procedures: A Musician's guide to the Alexander Technique* demonstrates an example, in which one of his students would look at his left hand while playing the cello. This causes tension in his head and neck, directly causing tension throughout his entire body.

Brennfleck states, “with training in the Alexander Technique, by thinking these directions one can learn to bring about a response in the body congruent with the messages being given.” He then explains that although such a statement may be unconvincing, it is true. To support this statement, he describes two instances in medical history where a surgical patient needed to consciously think about actions in order to perform them. This concept of thinking of making an action is known as *Directing*.

Another important concept is *Body Mapping*. This involves understanding one's skeletal anatomy and recognizing the differences in their sensory feedback and actual movements. The more accurate one's Body Mapping becomes, the more one can understand the most efficient ways for their body to move.

As stated earlier, many other concepts compose the Alexander Technique, it takes years of training and study to fully understand and put it all into practice.

Chin/Instrument Angle

At first glance, it seems that there is not much complication as to a proper way to hold your chin up at the proper angle. However, the marcher may actually be creating excess tension in the neck through creating the proper angle. This is easily overlooked, considering how little instruction more than “10 degrees above parallel” is often given.

Jeremy Chance points out the prevalent misconception of people believing that their neck and head move together as one unit. In fact, they are separate components that work together. It is possible to just tilt the head, without moving the neck along with it. He states that the movement takes place at the joint connecting the head and neck and should not feel like a big movement.

By applying this concept to the chin/instrument angle, the marcher can have a deeper understanding of how to correctly direct their chin angle to be “above parallel” without potentially creating excess tension in the neck, affecting overall performance throughout the body.

Conclusion

The Alexander Technique has the potential to be an advantageous approach to marching instruction. Utilizing aspects of the Technique in marching instruction holds potential for improving performance and health in a marching band and provides an evidence-based approach to teaching marching fundamentals.

Implementing the Alexander Technique into marching instruction does provide some challenges, one being the depth of content and practice needed to effectively understand the Technique. People spend years studying this technique; it is definitely not something that someone can understand in such a small amount of time. Because of this, it may be better to implement only specific concepts from the Technique and in a simplified manner, as it may be difficult for the marching band to understand in the limited time available for instruction.

Due to the complex nature of the Technique, it is necessary to have someone professionally trained for teaching the Alexander Technique to introduce the concepts to the ensemble. In the likely case that the Technique instructor is unfamiliar with movement in a marching band, collaboration and planning with the marching band instructor will be needed in order to set the lesson plan in place.

One limitation is the fact that this study is completely literature-based, meaning that no participants were involved in developing the conclusion. The findings in this paper are intended to begin an exploration into finding healthier approaches to marching band instruction. Furthermore, these findings act as a way to form discussion and interest from marching band instructors and those familiar in the Alexander Technique to combine efforts into a marching band program. It is recommended for future research to observe more connections between both the concepts of the Technique and marching band instruction, as well as recording the concepts being put into practice.

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