

Does Music Teacher Education Make a Difference?

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Music teacher education sits at the crossroads of transformation in music education. The four- or five-year period of undergraduate teacher preparation is often viewed as the seedbed of significant change in the profession. It makes sense that if we hold expansive visions for music teaching and learning, cultivating the vision of our soon-to-be colleagues is vital. Yet criticisms and competing claims about learning to teach are plentiful, with numerous calls for reform.

As music teacher educators, we often find ourselves in the problematic position of sorting through various proposals from our institutions, accrediting bodies, state licensure offices, colleagues in the field, and the public at large. Each group identifies perceived gaps and offers solutions that frequently involve adding new courses or requirements to an already overburdened curriculum.

Without a clear understanding of the mission of music teacher education to guide these decisions, preparation programs can turn into a “big overgrown thicket, which pleases nobody, not the musician, nor the humanist, nor the educationist” (Leonhard, 1985, p. 11). How do we cut through the thicket so that music teacher education can achieve its complex and crucial aims?

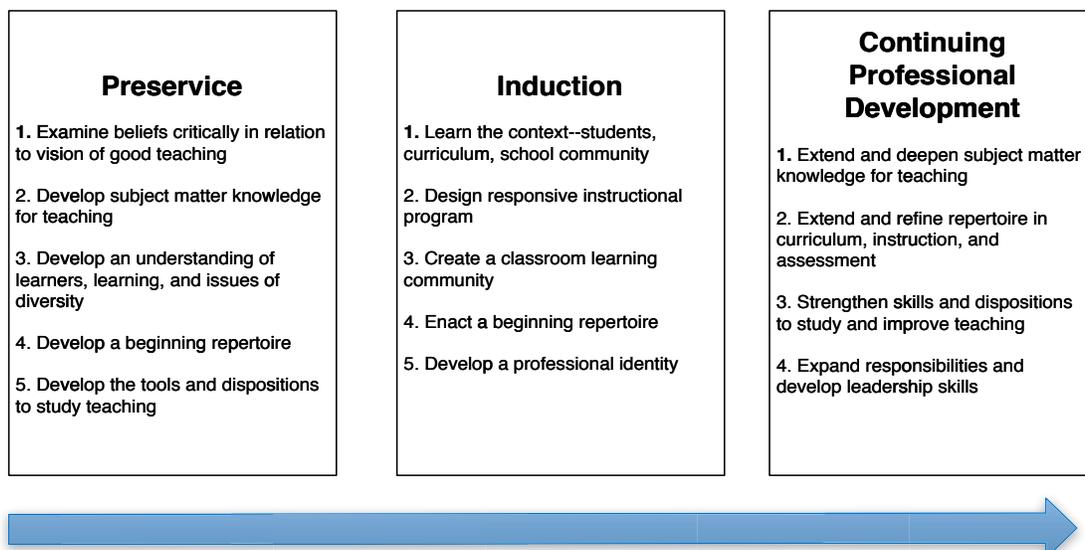
An often-stated truism provides a useful way of approaching what could be an intractable problem, the notion that “learning to teach is a lifelong endeavor.”

Viewing teacher education as a broad trajectory (from pre-college through career exit) suggests that particular experiences in a teacher’s development have specific aims and goals for each phase of a long span of growth. It is a relief to abandon the notion that everything a music teacher needs to know to be successful can be adequately addressed in preservice programs, and that some key understandings are best developed later.

Sharon Feiman-Nemser, a noted teacher education scholar, has framed the central tasks of learning to teach in three phases: preservice, induction and continuing professional development (2012, p. 143; see Figure 1). In this brief essay, we take Feiman-Nemser’s lead to address the central tasks for music teacher education in the preservice phase in the hope that these ideas will prompt productive conversations about undergraduate preparation.

Figure 1

Central Tasks of Learning to Teach (Feiman-Nemser, 2012, p. 143)



Examine beliefs critically in relation to vision of good teaching. One's visions or images of good teaching are incredibly powerful springboards for growth. Preservice teachers often emulate the music teachers who have inspired and supported their musical paths. They clearly hope to replicate their teachers' practices and ways of interacting with the next generation of students. Research tells us, however, that preservice teachers often enter programs believing that teaching is a form of transferring knowledge, with students absorbing knowledge and acquiring music skills through repetition.

These views of music teaching are at odds with the science of how people learn (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) and the artistic and culturally responsive ideas called for in reform-minded practice (Thiessen & Barrett, 2002). A key challenge for the music teacher education program is to provide intentional, multiple and "ongoing opportunities for uncovering, examining, reflecting, and refining beliefs" throughout a student's preservice experience (Thompson, 2007, p. 33).

Without acknowledging, confronting and providing alternative models of good practice, preservice music teachers' beliefs about teaching are likely to remain unchanged. In short, aims for preservice teacher education focused on forming visions of good teaching include:

- Articulating prior knowledge and beliefs about teaching;
- Expanding knowledge of alternate models and images of teaching through carefully selected observations, early field experiences and case materials;
- Engaging in critical reflection to broaden perspectives and develop professional judgment.

Develop subject matter knowledge for teaching. It seems self-evident that teachers should know and understand the content they teach. Schools and departments of music share this responsibility for developing comprehensive musical understanding. This includes developing preservice teachers' abilities to perform, to perceive/think/analyze sound, to create, to express, to represent music and to situate music in history and culture. It is also imperative for music teachers to consider how scholars working in different aspects of music think about and work in their fields.

Shulman (1986) has identified three main components of subject matter knowledge that help cut across disciplinary differences within music as a whole. These

include knowledge of (a) central concepts and principles and procedures for inquiry within a field, (b) explanatory frameworks for organizing and connecting ideas and (c) criteria generation and use of rules.

Knowing and understanding music content, however, is different from knowing how to teach music content. A key challenge for the teacher education program lies in helping preservice teachers learn how to: (a) connect disciplinary ideas and relate them to students' lives, (b) generate questions for their own students' inquiries, (c) generate analogies to represent core concepts and processes, and (d) create and critique curricular materials for student learning. Developing knowledge of music for teaching builds on musicianship to address these four avenues to guide work in classrooms.

Develop an understanding of learners, learning and issues of diversity. Like the task of developing subject matter knowledge for teaching, developing an understanding of learners, learning and issues of diversity seems self-evident. However, both research and anecdotal evidence suggest that many preservice teachers have limited understanding of how people learn (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) or understanding of culturally responsive/relevant ways of teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Unfortunately, it is rare that music/university courses focused on child development or cross-cultural conceptions of knowledge and practice actually aid prospective teachers in learning to teach children or adolescents. Without such understanding, belief structures based upon personal history and past images of teaching often mislead teachers into thinking that they know more about learners and learning than they actually do.

A key challenge here is for the music teacher education program to construct a framework for inquiry that uses action research and the psychological, social and cultural tools for investigating such questions as: How does race or socio-economic background affect learning or my teaching? How do adolescents make sense of their musical worlds? How do my own biases and experiences with diversity affect the kinds of learning activities I plan or justify as being worthwhile? A key aim, then, is to cultivate the dispositions and use of tools required for building substantial knowledge of learners, learning and diversity that moves beyond the university classroom and extends into schools, communities and families.

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Develop a beginning repertoire. We typically think of repertoire in terms of musical works built out of a set of well-practiced and highly honed pieces prepared and ready for public performance. In thinking about a beginning repertoire for music teaching, emphasis moves away from performing “set pieces” for public sharing to constructing and utilizing “set processes” for promoting student learning.

As Dewey (1933) noted years ago, a teacher’s pedagogical repertoire begins (and continues to develop) with investigating questions related to a learner’s response to what a teacher says, does, plans or asks. A key challenge embedded in developing a teaching repertoire is to avoid the tendency to “methodize” prospective teachers’ learning around specific or prescriptive models of teaching. Rather the goal should be on “helping teacher candidates figure out when, where, how and why to use particular approaches” as contrasted with simply acquiring, applying and demonstrating a variety of approaches (Feiman-Nemser, 2012, p. 111).

Opportunities to study and experiment with approaches within field and student teaching experiences are key, as are conversations with innovative and reflective school music educators. The most difficult challenge here is connecting theory and practice.

Develop the tools and dispositions to study teaching. Of the five tasks, this one may strike readers as odd or curious. Why would a preservice music teacher need to cultivate tools for studying teaching? Why not just learn to teach? This last statement implies that good teaching is a matter of inquiry, of reflection in and on practice. This notion situates preservice teachers at the very center of their own learning.

Given the challenges and changes facing schools, preservice teachers must be able to identify productive problems, analyze them, consider options and construct solutions that fit particular needs and contexts. Learning to teach relies on a teacher’s intelligent resourcefulness, critical reflection and professional judgment. Curiosity, reflection and experimentation are three key dispositions that are likely to serve music teachers well throughout their careers. The preservice program is a key place for cultivating them.

Processes, Partnerships and Potentials

Carrying out these five tasks and meeting the challenges embedded in them requires the recognition that in learning to teach music the “educational whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” It is a shared process built on many different partnerships, including college music faculty, college music education faculty and K-12 music educators. The potential for making a great difference lies in the ability of the preservice program to create conceptual coherence among its many different parts and build integrated connections across its partnerships.

This is its greatest challenge, yet holds the greatest potential. Why? Because it offers a guiding vision and cornerstone upon which to build curriculum, shape pedagogy and develop a culture necessary for the life-long goal of being a “student of music teaching.” The next greatest challenge in learning to teach music begins when the new preservice graduate signs the contract and enters the job world.

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