

Making a Difference in Music Teacher Education: From Preparation to Practice

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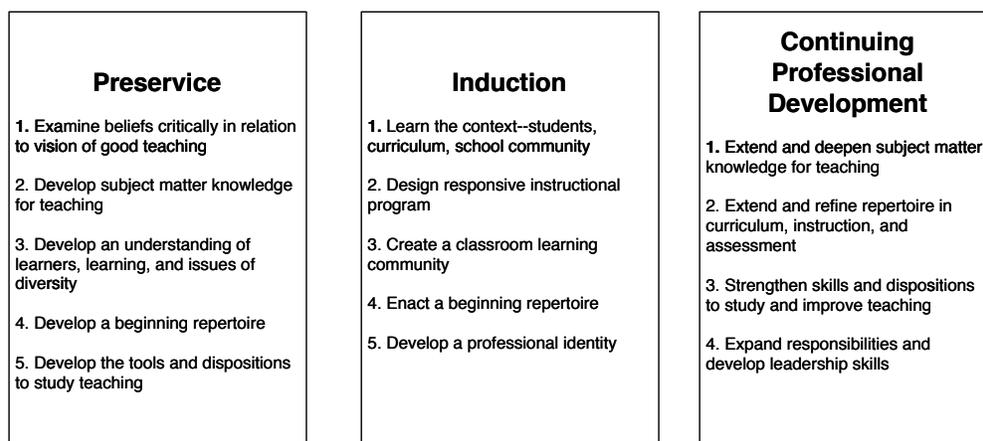
As music teacher educators, we revel in late summer phone calls from recent graduates who announce with such anticipation, “I got a job!” This triumphant moment heralds new phases of growth and metamorphosis as new music teachers move into their new classrooms and responsibilities, accepting the challenges and satisfactions, constraints and freedoms of music teaching.

In our previous essay we focused on the central tasks of learning to teach in the preservice phase of professional development (Campbell & Barrett, 2012) and identified the structural and conceptual frameworks required for creating a strong foundation for music teacher

education and for life-long professional development. In this essay, we turn to the induction phase and continue using the same analytical framework proposed by Sharon Feiman-Nemser (2012, p143; see Figure 1).

Figure 1

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



1. Learn the context—students, curriculum, school community. New music teachers “hit the ground running” and are expected to function and perform at the same levels of efficiency and understanding as their older colleagues and counterparts. This is an unrealistic expectation by any standard, but nonetheless a prevalent sentiment.

When novice music teachers start their first job, most aspects of the teaching environment — students, administrative policies, curriculum, testing requirements and local teacher cultural norms, along with the larger community — are actually quite unfamiliar.

A key task for newly hired music teachers is to, metaphorically speaking, get a lay of the land, map out the territory and get their bearings. A prime directive in gaining this knowledge is to learn what music goals and

learning outcomes are expected of the music students they are teaching and what materials and resources are available. Coupled with figuring out these different expectations is getting to know the students they will be teaching: what their interests and likes are, what prior knowledge and skills they bring to the classroom, what their life experiences are and what special considerations they may have for educational accommodations.

Understanding and connecting with the larger community goes hand-in-hand with gathering knowledge of students and the curriculum. For example, what are the preferred procedures for communicating with parents? What resources and services are available and could be used as assets in the music program? Much of this knowledge, however, comes not “all at once,” but gradually. The challenge in learning the context for new teachers is

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getting relevant information in the timeliest manner and staying “proactive” in the process.

2. Design responsive instructional program. Creating a responsive instructional program may be one of the hardest tasks of all for new music teachers. Why? A great deal of reflection and synthesis is needed to meld their knowledge of music and their knowledge of particular children into curriculum and instructional experiences that will be powerful enough to produce long-lasting, as well as immediate learning.

Furthermore, to be responsive to children’s musical thinking, new teachers must learn how to evoke and interpret students’ ideas and to generate appropriate pedagogical moves as lessons unfold. A danger for new (and more experienced) teachers is slipping into an instructional approach that “covers” material rather than to be responsive to what students are saying so as to “uncover” the overarching ideas and issues that undergird the study of music.

The need for ongoing mentoring is especially strong here as is the need for new teachers to connect with other music teachers in sharing ideas and strategies aimed at helping students achieve learning goals and outcomes.

3. Create a classroom learning community. Creating safe, respectful, self-disciplined classrooms filled with intellectual integrity is a major concern for all teachers. For new music teachers, this undertaking is focused on gaining control over both structural and curricular elements found in the music classroom.

The range of responsibilities for creating an effective classroom learning community is quite diverse. These include, for example, specifying procedures for the day-to-day organization of learning environments, enacting strategies that cultivate student collaboration, thinking about and communicating how activities should be carried out, posing key questions, and teaching students problem-solving strategies, along with cultivating specific dispositions such as curiosity and persistence. At the heart of creating a classroom learning community is constructing a culture of intellectual experimentation and risk taking.

Issues that impact new music teacher’s abilities to create dynamic and vibrant learning communities for their students deal primarily with their own intellectual dispositions, their own developing teacher identity, and a powerful fear of being judged. Creating a classroom culture based on curiosity, problem posing, or flexibility is not likely to be present when teachers themselves are not curious, problem seeking or flexible.

Risk taking — a prime ingredient in all intellectual activities — may seem incongruous with an authoritative organization of a classroom, a necessary ingredient for creating a community of learners. Yet embracing these contradictory ideas (among many others) as a part of professional identity development must take place because they lie at the heart of power, control, choice

and responsiveness.

Compounding and complicating all these issues is the fear of being judged by colleagues, students, administrators or parents. For a number of new music teachers, the “fear list” is huge and includes such things as taking a stance regarding a specific instructional approach (using project-based learning, for example); experimenting with forming “new” music ensembles (Taiko drumming, for example); employing “new” classroom management techniques (democratic group processing, for example), or responding to any one of the myriads of situations that arise daily in teaching.

If judged by how “well behaved a class is” or how well the new teacher is socialized into “the way things are done around here,” then new teachers may avoid active or complex learning activities simply because they do not quite yet know how to manage them. Courage is a particularly noteworthy attribute for new teachers to consider, simply because it can be empowering and bring about a sense of “control” over the very situations that seem out of control.

In addition, just as the new teacher needs to learn how to be responsive to students, the new teacher needs responsive mentoring by concerned colleagues and knowledgeable others. The reasons are not only practical, but also emotional. “Good teachers are not just well-oiled machines,” notes researcher Andy Hargreaves. “They are emotional, passionate beings who connect with their students and fill their work and their classes with pleasure, creativity, challenge, and joy” (1998, p. 835).

Wise mentors often help new teachers acknowledge these satisfying dimensions by putting less pressing concerns into perspective and by helping new teachers translate policy mandates into principled practice.

4. Enact a beginning repertoire. If the preservice phase of teacher development has been successful, new teachers should have a compelling vision of the purposes of music education and what excellent music teaching entails. Plus, they have had opportunity through their college years to experiment with connecting educational theory and practice.

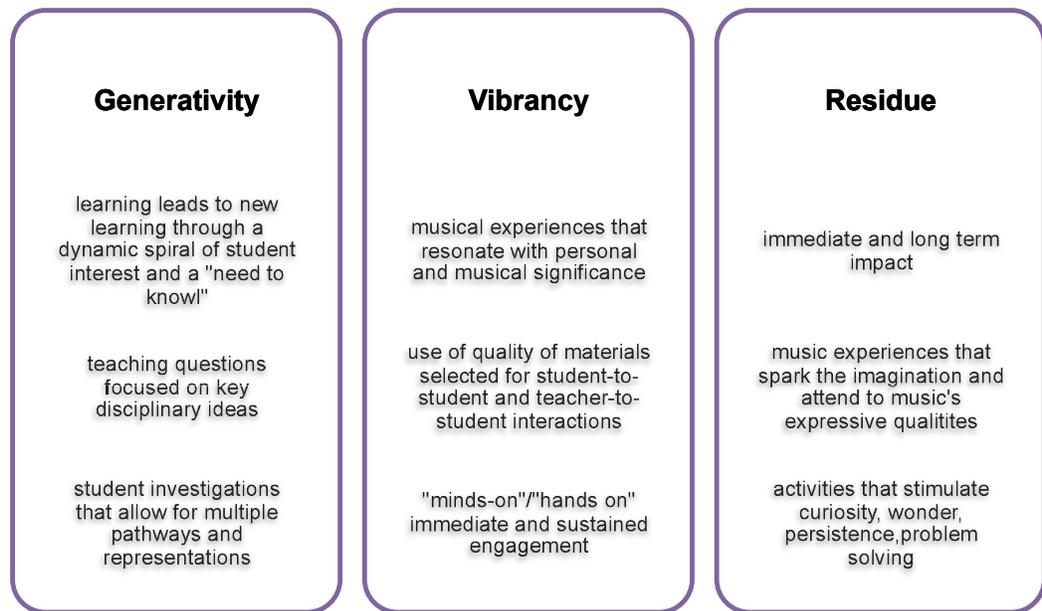
Now is the time to enact fully those powerful approaches learned in college and continue to experiment with them, but with the added goal of developing a deeper understanding of how their students respond to them. A constant goal and key challenge for new teachers is to reflect on the purposefulness of the strategies they use — refining, revising and rejecting strategies as learning unfolds in time and over the course of time.

Campbell, Thompson, and Barrett (2010) provide a powerful set of criteria that music teachers can use to help meet the challenge of building a purposeful and quality-driven teaching repertoire. They suggest that excellent music teaching uses pedagogies that produce both musical and educational generativity, vibrancy and residue (see Figure 2).

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Figure 2

Criteria for Assessing Purposeful Pedagogies (Campbell, Thompson and Barrett, 2010, pp. 126-127)



A repertoire of teaching strategies built on these criteria is ambitious for new teachers, as well as for highly experienced music teachers. A strong mentoring program coupled with a strong induction program, however, can support new teachers in building and enacting these pedagogies.

The danger (which includes the fear associated with being judged) is to abandon the principles of learning studied and experimented within the preservice program in favor of "perceived" safer approaches (such as rote teaching, worksheets, imitative learning, rehearsing for performance only, for example) or prescriptive methods of teaching.

Attention to purpose and quality of teaching and not just the management and control of learners can help new teachers "master nuts and bolts," build competencies and learn strategic and contextual information from their experiences.

5. Develop a professional identity. At the crux of each of the tasks (learning the context, designing a responsive instructional program, creating a learning community, and enacting a beginning repertoire) is the ongoing task of developing a professional identity.

Music teachers, perhaps unlike many other teachers, develop early on in their lives a special love for their subject matter — music. They also usually identify a music teacher who inspired them to pursue music teaching. In a rather uncanny way, new music teachers can articulate with conviction why music has an important place in schooling. Yet, new music teachers may have difficulty understanding that teachers take on many roles or ascribe to a whole range of images of teaching and learning.

Many of these roles and images are contradictory and compete for new teachers' attentions. Compare the image of "teacher as facilitator" with "teacher as director," or the image of learning as "a journey" with that of learning as "filling a blank slate."

When thinking about classroom management, new teachers often struggle with the need to be "friendly" and the need to "take charge of learning." The desire to be nurturing and responsive to individual differences can be at odds with the desire to treat all students the same and teach everyone the same set of skills. How to act in certain and specific ways can be daunting, as well as fraught with uncertainty and a feeling of minimal control.

Developing a professional identity is complex and ongoing, and a process whereby new teachers evaluate, identify and organize a sense of self as teacher (Erikson, 1968). It is deeply rooted in personal beliefs and attitudes and understandings about the roles afforded teachers in a profession.

If new teachers have critically examined their beliefs about music and learners in relation to a vision of good teaching, then they should be able to critique dominant images, explore available alternatives and commit to some choices and goals rooted in values that are both morally and ethically driven, not just technically expedient.

Mentoring and new music teacher learning

As Feiman-Nemser asserts: "induction happens with or without a formal program, and it is often an abrupt and lonely process" (2012, p. 123). The recognition that beginning music teachers need both support and mentoring is an acknowledged fact and of serious concern to the profession (see Conway, 2003).

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The specific frameworks guiding mentoring programs for beginning music teachers across the country are unknown. New York State, however, mandates an assistance/assessment-driven model aimed at improving skills and practices of novices (all initial certificate holders) with the purpose of helping P-12 students achieve state learning standards.

Regardless of mandate or the regulatory process used in mentoring programs, one key idea should drive new music teacher mentoring programs: they should focus on assistance and assessment that is “clearly designed to drive the profession, rather than to merely reflect current practice” (Robinson, 2003, p. 124).

The guiding outlook for mentors (as well as new teachers) then must be that of adopting a mindset of

being “agents of change.” Here the mentoring role is primarily educational and emotionally supportive. The work of both the mentor and the novice teacher is founded on continuous improvement that is characterized by reducing isolation, encouraging collaboration, developing inquiry and reflection, focusing attention on student thinking and development, and encouraging experimentation.

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