

Identities of Music Teachers in Australia: A Pilot Study

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This paper examines some of the issues of identity in relation to music teachers in Australia, questioning and examining desirable qualities of music teachers. In so doing, it investigates the models of Hargreaves and Marshall (2003) and Harrison (2003c) in seeking to determine from teachers, students and other stakeholders those attributes considered significant for teachers to possess and develop. While Hargreaves' model looks at teachers in the United Kingdom, this paper applies these principles to the Australian setting. Harrison's research focussed on singing teachers and provides some insights for applications in broader music education settings. These two viewpoints and frameworks will be drawn together, along with more recent research and anecdotal accounts of teacher education to give practical examples for pre-service teachers and existing practitioners. In specific terms, it studies the nexus between teaching, personal and musical skills with a view to creating a balance in the provision of teacher education and professional development situations.

Introduction

An extensive body of research exists that investigates the skills, attributes and qualities of music teachers. The purpose of such studies is to enhance the learning experiences of students by discovering means of enhancing these skills and attributes. Given the role of the teacher educator in developing appropriate courses of study, this literature is of vital importance as Asmus (2000, p. 5) expressed it: "Music teacher education has never before needed a base of substantive information about how to best prepare music teachers as it does now." Furthermore, Leglar (1993) challenges institutions to embrace change, thus assisting in providing a rationale for this study:

Very few institutions seem to be philosophically committed to research in music teacher education.... Ironically, music education researchers regularly lament the reluctance of classroom teachers to base practice on research, yet very few of them are actively engaged in the rigorous examination of their own practices (p. 67).

Recent literature in this field has focussed on a wide variety of interrelated issues from specific music skills through to broader personality traits. One of the most extensive projects in recent years has been the Teacher Identity in Music Education (TIME) project. Hargreaves and Marshall (2003), reporting on the TIME project, found that perceptions of the required skills for successful music teaching changed. As pre-service teachers moved into the workforce, there was an increased emphasis on communication and interpersonal rather than musical performance skills. Their findings also indicate that the profession is still largely judged in terms of musical performance skills. Specific musical skills were also highly regarded (Brophy, p. 3, 2002).

Young and Shaw (1999, p. 673) found that "subject-matter knowledge" rated highly in teacher success regardless of the teacher's overall effectiveness rating. Collier (1987) and Berliner (1986) also suggested that knowing one's subject matter is an attribute of effective

teaching. The need to continually develop knowledge and skilled was noted by Bidner (2001, p. 4): “music teacher educators have to keep abreast of the standards for effective teaching so that students are appropriately prepared.” Teachout’s (1997) findings concur, to a certain extent with Hargreaves and Marshall (2003): pre-service and experienced teachers placed teaching skills as significantly more important than musical skills. Experienced teachers rated the following teacher skills/behaviours as being more important for successful teaching in comparison to the pre-service teachers: enthusiasm, maximized time on-task, and maintenance of student behaviour. Hamann, Baker, McAllister and Bauer (2000, p. 102) also cited enthusiasm, an ability to generate high energy, and an ability to relate lesson content to students' interests and needs as significant.

According to the literature, management skills were also a key issue. Conway’s (2002, p. 32) study of administrators and mentors suggested that pre-service teachers needed better preparation for the administrative part of the position. Comments included: “I wish there were some way for these new teachers to know more about budgets and dealing with parents,” and “He is a good teacher, but he really struggled with the administrative piece of the job.” Wheeley’s (2002, p. 37) study provides a list of 28 management tasks required of performing arts teachers. While these are too numerous to be listed here, the broader grouping of these tasks into planning, financial, physical, human resource and other management skills is worthy of note.

The specific research for this paper grew out of some earlier examinations by the author in the field of singing teaching. Harrison (2003c, p. 11) found that there were a number of attributes that were considered most important for teachers to possess including:

- Respect for the individual, with an emphasis on flexibility
- Knowledge of appropriate repertoire
- Aural, keyboard, language and organizational skills
- The ability to communicate effectively with enthusiasm, encouragement, good humour and patience.

Research Structure

This research follows a similar model to the author’s 2003 study. Two studies were conducted: one with pre-service teachers and the other with experienced teachers. The data collection for this project was undertaken via email and through questionnaire. Using email provided the researcher with access to a wide variety of subjects across a broad geographical range. Apart from the author’s stimulus material, there was little opportunity for intrusion of the interviewer in the response period for the subjects. While the initial questionnaire to pre-service teachers provided some stimuli for response, the respondents were invited to express in their own words their experiences as students and pre-service teachers. There is no intention in the research to hold these responses as “truth;” rather as “accounts.” These “accounts” are a product of the time and place in which they were made and, if asked the same question again at a different time in a different place, the answer could be different. The sampling technique employed is theoretical sampling. This involves purposely selecting and revising the selection of the sample. The method is not blinded or unbiased and is therefore not statistically representative.

For the first study, twenty-nine pre-service teachers asked, via questionnaire, what they considered important attributes of teachers were. The significant parts of the survey were focused in the following manner:

1. The students were asked to reflect on their experience as teachers and students.
2. Based on these experiences of teaching and learning, they were asked to comment on what they believed to be important attributes for music teachers to possess.
3. To focus their thoughts further, they were invited to consider such things as personality traits, musical competency, broad knowledge, specific musical knowledge and the balance of the teacher- performer.
4. Finally they were asked to respond to the question: Which is more important relational skills or musical ability?

Twenty-nine students responded to the survey. The survey was followed up with email discussion to clarify thoughts and comments of subjects.

In the second study, twelve teachers were surveyed in relation to their perceptions of the significant attributes a teacher should possess. Respondents were asked to classify these as personal, professional, musical and other attributes.

A number of strategies have been used to ensure the analysis of this data is well argued and draws appropriate conclusions. The use of email has meant that the subjects' own words are used in the examples given below. Wherever feasible, detailed quotes have been included to illustrate the argument. Using a technique employed by Green (1997), more than one response has been included in instances when different candidates have given almost identical responses to each issue. The meanings of these quotes are related to the existing literature as outlined in the proceeding section. One of the reasons for providing such a detailed account of the literature is to make clear and valid connections between the current findings and research to date.

On completion of the data-gathering phase, the researcher collated the responses. In reading the material, the aim was to find similar themes and trends. The researcher also looked for ways in which the responses differed radically from each other and the factors that may have contributed to those differences. The foundations for these themes and differences could be found in the existing literature and the experience of the researcher as a practicing teacher.

The primary techniques used to address the trustworthiness (validity) of this study were data-collection triangulation (Patton, 1990), member checks (Stake, 1995), and attention to investigator expertise (Patton, 1990; Seidman, 1991). The variety of data-collection measures described above constituted data triangulation for this study. Member checking refers to the verification of information with research participants. In this study, teacher participants reviewed the results and discussion sections of this paper to correct any information in the generalizations or the supporting evidence. Careful attention to the expertise of the researcher was relied upon throughout data collection and analysis. The researcher had enough background in the content area and association with the participants to be empathetic in approach and to establish the necessary rapport.

Study One: Results

In relation to important attributes for music teachers to possess, it was possible to classify the responses into two categories:

1. Knowledge and skills

2. Personal attributes

A number of responses traversed both domains. This was particularly so in the area of communication, which was seen as both a skill and personal attribute. For the purposes of this paper and as a result of the nature of the responses, communication skills have been included under attributes.

Knowledge and Skills

Four areas of knowledge stood out in the responses: These were knowledge of content, pedagogy, repertoire and curriculum documents (n=11). The next most highly rated response was in the area of organisation, which 5 respondents considered important. The other skills considered important by significant number of were:

- Possession of a range of teaching styles (n=4)
- Behaviour management skills (n=3)
- Reflective skills (n=3).

As with Brophy's (2002) research, specific musical skills were targeted as significant by some respondents. Music skills were seen as being important for modelling activities and tasks to be undertaken by the students. Of most statistical relevance were the following:

- Sight-reading
- Be able to do what you are teaching
- Being able to sing
- Improvisation skills
- Having a variety of personal musical tastes.

The subjects did not mention further elaboration in relation to the means of obtaining these skills at this time.

Attributes

Respondents gave the highest response in this domain to the capacity of teachers to make music fun and enjoyable. Linked to that, in many cases, was the capacity to motivate, encourage or to instil a love of music in students (after the findings of Teachout, 1997 and Hamann et al, 1998). Flexibility and patience were also viewed as highly desirable attributes. Other attributes mentioned include:

- Meeting students where they are at
- Being creative/imaginative, inspirational
- Knowing the students as people first, learners second.

The knowledge of students as people was linked to the notion that music teachers are more than teachers of music, as raised by some subjects and found by Hamann et al. (2000). Many respondents commented on the teaching of numeracy and literacy, the teaching of personal development and the teaching of co-operation skills as high on the agenda.

Musical Verses Relational Skills

Part of the research design was to ascertain from pre-service teachers whether they considered music skills or relational attributes to be more important. This stimulus was founded

in the work of Hargreaves and Marshall (2003) in the TIME project.

From the twenty-nine responses, more than half considered relational skills more important than musical skills, while a third considered a balance between music and relational skills to be important – that is of equal importance. The remaining subjects did not respond directly to the question, but rather replied with comments such as:

I know of several brilliant teachers who are poor performers/musicians and performers who are bad teachers, so you can have one without the other. For teachers the ability to teach and communicate with students is much more important than being able to play your instrument (but competence is good!).

The subsequent discussion on this topic led to the importance of particular musical skills being raised. As found in the questionnaire, improvisation, singing and sight-reading were deemed to be important. In response to stimulus regarding specific music skills, subjects responded with:

It is important to have some basic musical knowledge like what sharps and flats are and how to read treble clef. It's also helpful, but not so important, to have some general musical knowledge about eras and style, etc. although these can be looked up in class texts.

It is refreshing to note that some subjects saw their role as resource teachers or pointers to knowledge, rather than “knowing it all” themselves at this stage. Subjects also commented on musical skills being tied to management:

As far as musical skills go, I have seen many cases that the students seem to think more of a teacher if the teacher can play a wide variety of instruments, especially in the younger grades of 8 and 9. So the more musically versed a teacher is, the more a class will respect them. And this, I feel ties in with the teacher student relationship.

In response, however, one subject commented: “I don't think dazzling students with the amount of instruments you play will buy everyone over. Isn't it about what kind of person you are as a teacher... and then how much knowledge you have of your subject area?”

This reignites the discussion in terms of the possession or acquisition of relational skills. Many subjects connected relation skills with engagement and management: “More important [than musical skills] are the relational skills to inspire students and create a love of music in them” and “It is important to have a good relationship with the students because without respect, a classroom can be a hard place to be in.” Some made a more direct reference to management: “...fostering the love of music in children is so important so that they can look forward to coming to classes. This in turn can solve many management issues if the children enjoy the session.”

Perhaps of greater importance to music educators, particularly those involved in teacher education is the question as to which relational skills might be taught and which might be innate was discussed. The purpose of this question was more to find out about students' sense of philosophy of education, raising issues of teaching the talented, the “unteachable” and the average student. Only one respondent took on the issue of relational attributes being taught or being innate. The response provides us with some useful stimulus for reflection in terms of provision of practicum and internship placement: “Relational skills really can't be taught, but come with experience. You need to find a good medium between friend to the students and authority figure who is there to be listened to.”

Pre-service teachers therefore expected a great deal from their training but also recognised that experience would assist them in gaining some of the relational and management skills considered to be important. Unlike Hargreaves and Marshall (2003), they found that the relational skills were slightly more important than musical skills at this point in their development.

Study Two: Results

The second study involved discussion with experienced music teachers to gain their insights into important attributes for music teachers to possess. Twelve teachers were invited to take part in this pilot study. These teachers had at least 5 years experience, though some had been teaching for up to 30 years. It was anticipated that, by having a breadth of experience, from a variety of different training perspectives, a snapshot of experienced teachers' opinions could be gained.

To date, seven of the twelve volunteers have responded. Their responses were put into the two categories used in Study One: knowledge and skills and attributes. While some of the responses were identical to Study One, some were quite removed from the pre-service teacher expectations and understandings. This perceived change between pre-service teachers and practicing teachers is an area worthy of longitudinal study.

Knowledge and Skills

Several respondents in the second study mentioned the need for management skills, as described earlier by Wheeley (2002). One respondent made the remark: "Music teachers need certain attributes that other teachers do not. The role of Music teacher is certainly different to that of other teachers as there are many other tasks that music teachers do that are not expected of others." In the administrative area, the following attributes were referred to:

- High level of interpersonal skills
- Ability to communicate in oral and written form with students, colleagues, parents and administrators
- Time management
- Managing technology
- Organization
- Multitasking
- Human resource management skills including diplomacy and behaviour management strategies.

Several responses focussed on the human resource management area, including this example: "[the teacher requires] high organisational skills – due to the fact that many Music teachers would be charge of the management of a number of staff such as instrumental staff as well as others who work in combination with them on events."

Respondents also referred to the need to work with parents, members of the community and school administration. Several teaching and musical skills were mentioned by respondents with the following as being of major importance:

- Skills in and appreciation for music from a wide variety of genres, including popular styles.
- High level of content knowledge and skill
- Skills in musical software for implementation of web-based learning, composition and ear

- training
- Musical arranging skills
- Showing proficiency at some aspect of practical music making as a model and for motivation
- Being able to perform proficiently on main instrument
- Be able to plan and teach to adapt to students who don't have the same skills as the teacher; being able to meet students where they are at
- Having good aural, musicianship and literacy skills
- Be able to conduct.

One response summarised these thoughts in this fashion:

It is necessary for music teachers to have a high level of musical skills, preferably with an interest in a broad range of music. From a practical viewpoint in understanding that teaching extends beyond the "doing" of music, music teachers also need excellent conducting skills to be able to expose their students to satisfying ensemble music experiences.

Attributes

In the area of personal attributes, many qualities suggested overlap with the earlier comments in relation to organisational and administrative skills. The question raised by pre-service teachers in relation to the gaining of these attributes by experience may have contributed to a synthesis of attributes and skills by practicing teachers. Attributes mentioned included:

- Fun and Friendly
- Enthusiasm and passion for imparting subject matter
- Being encouraging and inclusive
- Reflective skills including recognition of limitations, openness to new ideas, willingness to seek advice and undertake professional development.
- Honesty
- Lifelong love of the arts/music
- Arts/music advocacy
- Be able relate to young people and like working with them
- Possession of leadership qualities.

The emphasis on fun, enthusiasm and passion was the most statistically significantly response. The capacity to admit shortcomings and seek assistance through professional development, as advocated by Bidner (2001), was highly regarded.

Conclusions

Inevitably, the process of summary omits attributes considered important in some circumstances. It is possible, through examining both studies, to discover some common elements found by pre-service and experienced teachers to be of significance. These included but were not restricted to:

- Knowledge of content, pedagogy, repertoire and curriculum documents
- Management skills incorporating organisation, behaviour management, time management and human resource management
- Skills in managing technology
- Possession of a range of teaching styles

- Reflective skills for self evaluation and improvement
- Practical music skills in a variety of genres and including sight-reading, singing, conducting, composition and arrangement.
- Capacity to motivate, inspire and encourage
- Connection with students as people.

Perhaps above all else was the need for interpersonal skills - ability to communicate in a variety of ways with the many stakeholders in the musical community, but most importantly to the students.

It is intended that the project continue to track the thoughts of these students as they enter the workforce as newly qualified teachers and to expand the study of teachers experienced teachers into a wider pool. Furthermore, the data will be scrutinised more closely to discover deeper meaning and applications for teachers and teacher educators. Collaboration with domestic and international researchers will also further enhance this process.

About the Author

Scott's career as an educator spans almost 20 years. He has taught classroom music in state and private schools and singing to students in primary, secondary and tertiary environments. A graduate of Queensland Conservatorium, he was Director of Music and Expressive Arts at Marist College Ashgrove from 1988 to 1997, after which he was appointed Lecturer in Voice at Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music, Mackay. Formerly Director of Performing Arts at Clairvaux MacKillop College, Brisbane, Australia, Dr Harrison now lectures in music education at Griffith University and maintains an active performance profile. Recent publications have focussed on teacher identity, gender, choral and vocal education. He is a National Council member for ANATS (Australian Association of Teachers of Singing) and Advisory Committee member for AMEB Queensland.

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