

The Professional Identity of Music Teachers: A Lifelong Discovery

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Introduction

In a speech given to a group of wind conductors, Dennis Tupman said, “As music teachers, you will not be teaching music; rather you will be teaching yourself. Hence, the most important thing you can do as educators is to discover who you are” (cited in Prescesky, 1997, p. 175).

Discover who you are as a music teacher. Discover who *I* am as a music teacher. This is something I’ve been thinking about for many years. Who am I as a music teacher and how did I *become* the music teacher who is currently me?

Let me briefly share my story with you. I was fortunate to grow up in a family in which music and education were important. I have fond memories of my parents, siblings and me spending celebrations with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins making music. Whether it was singing Christmas hymns in an almost endless variety of vocal combinations, or playing concert band repertoire in our back yard on summer afternoons, making music together was something that was an integral part of all family gatherings.

In our house, it seemed that someone was always making music, and we all took lessons of some kind when we were growing up. If we weren’t making music, we were taken to listen to my father conduct either his high school or community bands or choirs. When we were older, we often participated in the music making too.

Influenced by family and community, I entered a Bachelor of Music Education program after high school, with the goal of becoming a high school band teacher. The only real change in

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my personal path during this time was that after spending two summers playing concerts for elementary school aged children as a member of a woodwind quintet, I decided that teaching music to elementary school students was what I really was interested in doing. I was fortunate to secure an elementary music teaching position and for the next 17 years, I felt blessed to be paid for doing something I absolutely loved!

Throughout my years of teaching, I involved myself in various professional development opportunities and took two years away from teaching to complete a Master of Music degree and a diploma program at the Kodály Institute in Hungary. However, it was an opportunity for me to become involved with teaching pre-service music education, six years ago, that opened new worlds for me and caused many questions. In looking for some answers, I returned to school once again, this time as a Ph.D. student.

I currently teach music to elementary pre-service generalist and specialist teachers in a one-year Bachelor of Education program. When I first began teaching pre-service generalist teachers, I discovered that before I could begin sharing the wonders and importance of music in the elementary classroom, I had to work through the feelings that many of them had about participating in music -some positive, some negative- based on their personal experiences with music in elementary school. I asked them to tell me stories about their experiences with music when they were elementary school students and they were forthcoming. One story has stayed with me since I first heard it was told to me by a man in one of my classes. I would guess that he would have been in his mid-thirties at that time and was the father of three young children. He reflects:

In grade one; the music teacher grouped us according to our singing ability. There were three groups: the “nightingales,” the “bluebirds” and the “crows.” I was a

crow and was OK with being a crow. One day, she listened to me sing and promoted me to the bluebirds. After about a month, she listened to me sing again. I had a cold at the time and I told her that, but she didn't listen. Instead, she put me back with the crows. I never wanted to sing again. (Personal reflection, 2001)

I'm happy to say that, although this story was still very in this man's mind almost 30 years after that fact, he participated in our music course with an open mind and by the end of the term ventured that he thought he might even be able to teach some music to his future homeroom class, if need be!

The sharing of stories and the keeping of regular reflective journals has proved to be an important part of this pre-service music course for all students learning to be generalist elementary school teachers. I realized that when students begin to reflect on their own experience with music education and share their stories with others, they begin to relax, become more open to learning, and, in most cases, leave the course feeling confident about their abilities in this area, with the perception that, if required, they are capable of delivering some kind of music program to the students in their homeroom classes.

The other group of students I teach, pre-service elementary school music specialist teachers, come from a variety of different experiences, musical backgrounds and undergraduate university programs. While most have university music education degrees, some do not. Even within the category of students who come with degrees in music education, their experiences are often different. From the moment we first meet together and the members of the class introduce themselves and tell us a bit about their background, the students begin an unofficial "sorting" of the members of the class. The non-voice majors in the class worry about having so many "good" or "real" singers in their midst; the students who are not comfortable playing piano, shrink at

their lack of ability. Those who come with a performance background begin to wonder if they should have taken some music education courses during their undergraduate program and the few who come to us with some music background, but little university music experience, tend to look like a bit like deer with their eyes caught in the headlights of a car! Much of my initial role is to assist them in recognizing that each one of them is unique and, as such, brings distinctive qualities to the community of our classroom. Their personal goal is to work on discovering who they are as a music teacher.

Identity

Why did I share my personal story oh my teaching path with you? Because what I am really describing is the story of the building of my professional identity as a music teacher. Why am I the music teacher I am? How have people, events and experiences in my life influenced who I am as a music teacher at this particular moment in time? How can I assist my own students in recognizing and learning from their personal experiences as they discover their emerging identity as a music teacher? How do rich descriptions of music teachers' stories assist them in understanding who and why they are as teachers? How does understanding one's own professional identity impact on career development?

Fortunately for those interested in this area of research, groundbreaking and substantial work has been conducted by Canadian music education researchers over the past decade and a half to provide a solid foundation upon which to build.

First of all, what is identity? Woodford (2002) and others define identity as "the imaginative view or role that individuals project for themselves in particular social positions, occupations, or situations" (p. 675). Since the early 1990s, Roberts (1991) has looked at the

social construction of professional identity of undergraduate music education students and his efforts have brought attention and credibility to this area of research and paved the way for further exploration in this area. Among his findings were that an unofficial hierarchy seemed to exist in many undergraduate music programs where performance majors seems to be at the top and often music education students somewhere near the bottom. In general, undergraduate music education students are most often rewarded for their performance abilities, not their potential as teachers. In fact, many music education students, while their identity as a musician is strong, their teacher identity is not well developed, if at all. For these students, their *musician* self conflicts with their *teacher* self and some find the two identities very hard to reconcile. Because of the difficulty in reconciling these identities, many of these students find the transition to teaching very difficult and some choose not to enter the profession and pursue other career opportunities, often in music performance.

Prescesky's (1997) research involving four pre-service music education students, as they struggled to establish a professional identity, supports Roberts' findings. Two of the participants easily blended their teacher and musician identities, while the other two experienced great difficulty and actually decided to pursue further studies in performance rather than continuing along a teaching path.

Other Canadian music education researchers have approached the examination of professional identity among undergraduate music education students using a variety of research vehicles. Dolloff (2003) asks her undergraduate music education students to draw pictures of their image of a music teacher and then uses the results to discuss and explore the students' implicit and explicit ideals of what and who a music teacher is, allowing them to use this information as they consider who they hope to become as a music teacher.

Both Beynon (1998) and Rose (1998) look at the construction of identity using critical theory and action research lenses, respectfully, with pre-service teachers who are involved in long-term practicum experiences, students who are in the final stages of their programs and soon-to-be teachers in the field. Their common goal is to encourage their students to defy and resist the status quo of the music education establishment and to independently create their own, unique, identity as a music teacher.

Cameron, Bartel, Wiggins and Wiggins (2004) look at the question of identity and music educators from a different perspective, the view of the pre-service generalist elementary teacher who, in Ontario, could likely be required to teach music as part of their teaching assignment. They found that if these teachers think they are capable of teaching music in their classroom, and open to the possibility, they likely will be successful at it, to some degree. They found the opposite is also true. If generalist teachers feel they cannot teach music and are not open to it, they will likely fail.

Finally, Woodford's (2002) chapter entitled "The Social Construction of Music Teacher Identity in Undergraduate Music Education Majors" in *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning* provides a comprehensive summary of the work done in the area of identity of undergraduate music education students in Canada.

While important research has been conducted into the professional identity of undergraduate music education students, it is imperative that the same focus is extended to pre-service music education students, as they prepare to enter the teaching profession, begin their first years of teaching and progress through their career, as they continue to develop as music teachers.

As long as generalist elementary teachers are expected to deliver music to their homeroom students, attention must also be directed to the formation of a “teacher of music” identity in pre-service and in-service generalist teachers over the course of their career, as they address the reality that they may be required to teach music in their elementary classrooms. Research potential in this area and is rich and unexplored and, as such, warrants individual consideration beyond the realm of this paper. For this reason, the remainder of this paper will focus on the discussion of the development of identity in specialist music educators.

Emerging music teachers must have the opportunity to explore the realities of what it means to be a teacher, and learn to understand who each of them is as a music teacher. When I ask pre-service music education specialist students why they want to become music teachers, answers revolve around similar themes of making a difference in the lives of their students and sharing their passion for music with their students. They have visions of opening their students’ lives to the joys, gifts, mysteries and wonders of music, just as many of their music teachers did for them, so that music will be as important a part of their students’ lives as it is of theirs.

If, when these emerging teachers enter the teaching profession, the vision or identity they have created in their undergraduate and pre-service experience is somewhat satisfied, they will continue to develop and grow as a teacher. However, if the identity they have constructed for themselves as a pre-service teacher is not congruent with the realities of a beginning teacher, this can lead to feelings of frustration, failure and disenchantment with teaching (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000; Hebert & Worthy, 2001). If these feelings are not resolved, implications for both the teacher and the students they teach can result. For example, some teachers may become discouraged with teaching music, which could impact on their performance in the classroom, future development as a music teacher or cause them to not want to teach music. Studies have

shown that, in North America, approximately 30% of teachers with five or less years of teaching experience choose to leave the teaching profession. While the reasons for leaving are complex, and may not be fully understood, studies cite the lack of positive experiences in teaching as a major contributing factor (Ministry of Education in Ontario, 2004).

Some of these same feelings of frustration, failure, and disenchantment with teaching are also felt by some experienced teachers at various stages of their career. Research shows that this can influence their teaching performance, their relationship with their students, colleagues, others in the educational community, and their own further development as teachers (Cockburn, 2000). In other words, their perception of their identity as a teacher, or professional identity, is deeply entwined with their teaching practice.

It is my belief that identity directly impacts teaching practice and teacher development, and this is echoed by the work of many others, including Csikszentmihalyi (1992), who says that “It is not the skills we actually have that determine how we feel, but the ones we think we have” (p. 75). When music teachers possess a positive image of themselves as a teacher, they are motivated to further evolve as an educator. If they do not possess such an image, their development as a teacher can be halted. This can lead to music teachers in crisis and has broad implications for music teacher retention, music teacher satisfaction and pre-service and in-service teacher education.

Narrative Inquiry

Vital to any research study is that the method is a good “fit” with the problem being considered. In looking at the role that an elementary school music teachers’ perceived professional identity has on their teaching practice and development, narrative, both as story and

method, is not only an appropriate fit, but the methodology most likely to provide rich and enlightening data. Storytelling has always been recognized as a valuable way in which to not only entertain, but educate. Educational researchers have come to recognize the value of individual educators telling stories of their teaching, to encourage reflection and development of one's own teaching practice and provide insight for the larger field of music teacher education.

Narrative inquiry, as a method, is “a broad term encompassing the interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analyzing stories of life experience and reporting that kind of research” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 171). It can take a variety of forms, including life histories, narrative interviews, journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, biographies and more recently, music, dance, photographs and film. Indeed, it is the flexibility and variety of approaches within the realm of narrative that allows for the kind and depth of reflection and discovery that will assist music teachers in creating and recreating their own professional identity over the course of their career as a music educator.

Narrative research is employed by a growing number of education researchers interested in pre-service and in-service teacher education. Walter Doyle (1997) contends that the practice of teaching is a *local event* with unique and particular features that defy categorization. Students in a classroom participate in events and it is through these events that students come to know and the same can be said of teachers. “If teaching is event and action with respect to a curriculum, then story is a quite appropriate, if not the only, way of knowing teaching” (p. 95). He feels that the relatively recent focus on narrative in research on teaching and teacher education “is an effort to bring the richness of this particular way of knowing to the complex world of classrooms” (p. 96).

Korthagen (2004) encourages researchers and teacher educators to use a holistic view when looking at teachers and teaching. Clandinin (1986) suggests that teacher education should focus less on the transfer of scientific knowledge and focus more on becoming conscious of one's own "personal practical knowledge." Bergner and Holmes (2000) and Kihlstrom and Klein (1994) investigate the area of teacher self-concept; Bullough (1997) explores teacher identity. Exploration in these areas leads to self-understanding.

Clandinin and Connelly (1999) coined the term "personal practical knowledge" to reflect their "epistemological interest in the personal and practical nature of education" (p. 1). They define personal practical knowledge as:

a term designed to capture the idea of experience in a way that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons. Personal practical knowledge is in the teacher's past experience, in the teachers' present mind and body, and in the future plans and actions. Personal practical knowledge is found in the teacher's practice. It is, for any teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation. (p. 1)

Their interest in teachers as knowers "... of themselves, of their situations, of children, of subject matter, of teaching, of learning" (p. 1), led them to view teacher knowledge in terms of narrative life history, as "storied life compositions" (p. 2).

Teachers create and recreate meaning or “personal practical knowledge” through the telling and retelling of stories. Postmodern researchers in music education have come to recognize that

the meanings of anything in life -research, education, music- are not to be found in some different, objective “external” reality to which a discussion or event refers. Instead meanings lie “inside” texts (discussions, institutions and events) in the stories (or narratives) that people tell for and about these things. (Elliott, 2002, p. 96)

When teachers gather in the staff room or at a social occasion, they often tell stories of life in the classroom, in colorful and vibrant detail, allowing both the teller and listeners the opportunity to reflect on the deeper meaning of the story. Bowman (2002) summarizes:

What makes education worthwhile, and presumably an important part of what distinguishes the educated, are experiences whose vividness and richness fundamentally change who we are by elevating what we expect of experience, of life, of each other. Education works through experiences that transform our expectations of the world and, consequently, who we are. (p. 67)

Eisner (1998) also calls for the recognition of the importance of tacit knowledge and the use of narrative:

This new realization in education concerning the importance of tacit knowledge

... has increasingly turned the attention of educational researchers to the use of

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narrative, such as teacher stories about teaching, as a way of understanding what teachers know when they act. Why narrative? Because stories get at forms of understanding that cannot be reduced to measurement or to scientific explanation.
(p. 208)

Through teaching viewed as a *local event*, as *tacit knowledge*, as *personal practical knowledge*, as *storied life compositions*, as *experience that transforms our expectations of the world and who we are*; teachers are able to “create, refashion and redefine their identity as a teacher” (Bowman, 2002, p. 76). By knowing and hearing their own voice, teachers have the tools to be *agents of change* (Beynon, Geddis, & Onslow, 2001) in their own practice as well as uniquely contributing to the broader realm of music education and music education research.

As an instructor of pre-service and in-service music teacher education, the concept of each teacher’s voice is central. Pre-service and in-service teacher education programs, music education included, are often criticized for not being as effective as they might be, for not assisting teachers in knowing themselves and shaping and recognizing their teacher identity, with the eventual goal of becoming “reform minded teachers” (Thiessen & Barrett, 2002, p. 759). Exploration in the area of each teacher’s voice, using narrative as the vehicle, holds much promise for the reforming of pre-service and in-service music teacher education.

Next Steps

I began this discussion of professional identity by focusing primarily on the experience of one music teacher—me. This was an intentional choice, as was the decision to include some of my stories, memories of music making with family and friends, and experiences with my own

students. All these experiences play a role in who I currently am as a teacher and my professional identity will continue to evolve as I continue with my research and work in music teacher education.

The process of constructing and reconstructing identity over the course of the life cycle of a teacher is common to all teachers, whether conscious or not. It is vital for all instructors of undergraduate, pre-service and in-service music teachers to assist their students in exploring their unique personal stories on the way to discovering each individual's professional identity, through the use of narrative inquiry. This process is especially important as music education students progress through the undergraduate and pre-service years and begin teaching, as a candidate's ideal of a "dream teaching job" is subject to, sometimes dramatic, change based on experiences in the field with "real" students.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an introduction to the notion of the development of a music educator's personal professional identity, using narrative inquiry as the medium with a distinctly Canadian focus. Narrative has been employed in Canada as an effective research technique in general education for many years and it is natural that this is extended to investigation in music education. The potential for exploration in the area of professional identity of music teachers is strong in many areas including the elementary music specialist teacher, the secondary music specialist teacher, and the elementary music generalist teacher. Extension to other arts areas is also encouraged.

In addition to providing music teachers with the opportunity to learn who they are as music teachers, knowledge of self, or understanding one's own personal professional identity, assists with teacher satisfaction, teacher retention, and may encourage teachers to continue their development as a music teacher over the course of their career, through such initiatives as board

or federation based professional development, positions of responsibility at the school or board level, additional qualifications courses or graduate studies, with the goal of providing the best possible experience for their students. To paraphrase Dennis Tupman, discovering more about who we are as educators will certainly strengthen the art of music education in Canada.

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