

A Reflection on “The Professional Identity of Music Teachers: A Lifelong Discovery” (A. Kim Eyre)

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In reflecting upon A. Kim Eyre’s chapter, “The Professional Identity of Music Teachers: A Lifelong Discovery” one must tell their own story. I will be brief.

I grew up in a family in which music was valued. My older brother studied piano, so I did, beginning lessons when I was five. I later took up singing, saxophone, composing and conducting.

My mother could not carry a tune. She could not tell if I was practicing my scales or my pieces. My father had a nice voice, which improved after he quit smoking, and I knew that he played piano. I did not know until I was well on my own musical journey that my father had played piano and saxophone in a dance band before World War II. Nor did I know until I was in my forties that my mother’s mother had been a professional singer.

I went to university planning to be a singer, but after two years in performance was wisely transferred into music education. I graduated with a master’s degree and began teaching generalist elementary teachers and specialists in a Faculty of Education. Except for four years in which I had excellent colleagues teaching music education in the Faculty of Education, I have been the only music education professor at my university for twenty-eight years. There is also no music department where I teach. I completed a D.M.A in Choral Conducting and Literature with minors in Music Education and Music History after twelve years teaching at the university level.

I teach, sing, compose and conduct choirs professionally. I sing and play for my own pleasure.

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Eyre's article prompted me to further develop my thoughts about two interwoven aspects in the lifelong discovery of my professional identity—the dichotomy that I have always felt between being a music educator and a performing musician; and the balancing act that has been my nemesis teaching generalist elementary teachers who may have to teach their own music.

The dichotomy between being a music educator and a performing musician is a terrible phrase to write! A music educator must be a musician. We must lead by example. If music is important in life, we must make music in our life, not just teach music as a job, as a means of employment.

If a music educator must be a performing musician, leading by example, what about all of those generalist elementary teachers who must teach music? The story Eyre cited of her student who was a mature father of three is more than familiar—it is a daily happenstance in my classes. “I can't sing,” “I can't keep a beat,” “I can't play an instrument”—my elementary school music teacher told me so! What a story to carry through life!

There are always success stories. A young woman was identified as a crow in elementary school, but she found that she could match pitch, took private voice and piano lessons after her required music education course and ended up teaching high school English and music. A young man dropped all music when his voice changed, learned some basic guitar in class, bought his own instrument and brought his mother to tears playing and singing *Silent Night* on Christmas eve in the privacy of their home.

There are less positive stories. Some pre-service teachers have stories which make a twelve-week music course so frightening that they cannot open their minds to the many facets of music education, some of which they could incorporate successfully into their classrooms. They

come with the attitude that they have managed quite well without music, ever since those days that they were turned against music, and their students will have to manage without as well.

There are pre-service teachers who are enthusiastic about music, play, sing and dance for their own pleasure and the enjoyment of others, and who will share their passion about music with children in the future whether they take the required music education course or not. I have encountered pre-service teachers with similar experience and skills who hold nothing but disdain for music education, which includes learning involving the concepts of music, directed music listening and music theory. They are already performers and cannot fathom what else there is to music.

I teach all of these pre-service teachers in the same classes. They are on the same journey discovering who they are and who they can be as potential teachers of music. I agree wholeheartedly with Eyre's contention that "when music teachers possess a positive image of themselves as a teacher, they are motivated to further evolve as an educator." How does one balance the content, the acquisition of skills, the maintaining of standards, and the joy, passion and fulfillment that music gives, to a mixed audience of pre-service teachers in one twelve-week course—and still give each traveler a positive image of themselves as a future teacher of music?

Eyre suggests that we listen to the stories pre-service teachers bring, and that we share our stories with pre-service teachers and each other so that we can develop our own professional identity as music teachers, and help others to do the same. I agree totally. In a vast country in which we live, I find that there are many similar stories from coast to coast and knowing that others share our experiences is important for teacher health and retention.

There is another story we need to hear. Why do we teach music? Historically the teaching of music began so that people could use music effectively and beautifully to worship

more profoundly. Why do we teach music now? As music educators, we have all studied about the merits of a musical education. We are always seeking to justify music programs.

In today's world, in our society, why do people still wish to learn about music? Are we teaching music for the right reasons? Do we know? In seeking to understand my professional identity as a music educator, I need to know.