
“Realities of Music Teaching: A Conversation”

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Vantage Points and Images of Music Teaching

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I think often of this passage by the British theorist R. A. Hodgkin that so aptly conveys the mutuality of teaching and learning: “We learn best as teachers; we teach best as learners. The effort to communicate strengthens knowledge and to be an authority is to know how to doubt” (Hodgkin, 1976, p. 3). Among music teaching’s many satisfactions is the opportunity to expand and refine ideas related to the making and study of music, and to do so with others in the stimulating setting of the classroom. To teach, as Hodgkin suggests, is to move back and forth from the solid core of what we know well to the more uncertain territories of discovery and inquiry. Many of us entered teaching because we were fortunate to be inspired by teachers who modeled this vibrant intellectual energy, and who revealed their curiosities and deeply held passion for learning during our brief encounters with them. When I read Estelle’s chapter on the realities of teaching, I was prompted to reflect on how little I knew about my own teachers’ lives outside of this classroom context, and how infrequently I caught a glimpse of their personal or professional struggles. My teachers were forthcoming about their understandings of the

disciplines they taught, but perhaps because their roles as teachers were bounded by certain norms and expectations (certainly exacerbated by my “*Pleasantville*”-tinged Midwestern upbringing in the 60s and 70s), there was seldom talk of other equally important matters. This reflection seems pertinent to me when thinking about the undergraduate students who enter our music teacher education programs. On what basis have they formed powerful images of teaching and how representative is their knowledge of teachers’ lives? How do these images limit or enable them as they make informed decisions about their professional paths, and think wisely about the intersection of their personal aspirations with professional goals? This chapter raises such questions, and offers a look “behind the scenes” to consider these matters of considerable importance.

Idealized images of teaching, and the hierarchical expectations for “progress” through a teaching career that Estelle mentions are evident each year as I interview prospective graduate students for master’s study. Some of these students have just finished their undergraduate degrees and seem eager to continue their formal schooling, believing that more time at the university will prepare them more fully to teach, thus postponing their entry into the field (and the opportunity to build a more situated understanding of teaching) by obtaining a graduate degree first. Other applicants are more seasoned and circumspect, having already taught for a few years. Their eagerness takes on a different character as they detail the puzzles and problems of teaching they have encountered, looking optimistically to graduate study as a stimulating environment where these problems can be confronted and solved. Both the inexperienced and the experienced, however, often give similar answers to the question, “What are your goals when you finish a master’s degree?” Often, these responses parallel Estelle’s observation

that they expect to travel along a trajectory of prestige and professional esteem from elementary to middle, middle to high school, and high school to college. The doctorate shimmers in the distance. I sense that few understand what pursuing a Ph.D. entails, but many see a doctoral degree as the nearly inevitable destination of their intended path. Although a terminal degree will make sense for some, I wonder why this progression has become such a robust expectation for so many. When new teachers look to the future, do they envision a broad range of accomplishments and satisfactions in addition to the accumulation of degrees to mark the path? Do we provide narratives of teachers' lives that convey diverse options and roles?

I feel a strong sense of privilege and responsibility to view music education from the vantage point of the professoriate, and to have so many venues through teaching, research, and leadership to cultivate a broad perspective on music teaching and learning. I am deeply grateful to work with preservice teachers and graduate students who are passionately committed to their growth and development, capable of sophisticated musical and intellectual thinking, and oriented toward making substantive changes in music education while honoring its longstanding strengths and artistic values. To act in imaginative and transformative ways to implement these changes in classrooms and in the field at large depends on music teachers who are willing to forge new curricular configurations strategically within school settings. This image of music teaching, which I consider to be of vital importance to our profession, suggests that we cultivate risk-taking, personal initiative, interpersonal understanding, and informed action. In my opinion, we face a challenge as scholar/leaders to develop portraits, portrayals, and narratives of teachers' lives that can be used to prompt a reform-minded orientation to

professional growth and development. I find it difficult to draw from my own induction story, for example, because the realities of entering music teaching in 2008 are so far removed from my own entry in 1977. Teachers' roles are intensified, the role of music has been eclipsed by the shadow of NCLB, and societal expectations for music programs are far more contested than they were 30 some years ago. A recent study suggests that instructional time in elementary art and music has been reduced by 35% since 2001 (Center for Education Policy, 2008). In this milieu, teachers face the dilemma of wanting to expand the comprehensive breadth of the music curriculum while facing diminished access to students. From my vantage point, our professional associations, institutions, and scholarly efforts can be more closely aligned to support teachers' professional learning and personal reflection on the visions they hold for their work, as well as the contingencies that bear upon their capacities for change. In order to cultivate reform-minded music teachers and for them to sustain their energies so that they can reap the satisfactions of a life in teaching, this alignment is crucial.

References

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