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Navigating On-Site Teaching Experiences: Multiple Perspectives from Two School-University Partnerships

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Abstract

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to examine the inner workings of two school-university partnerships as experienced by four stakeholders. The specific objectives of this study included (a) exploring the inherent challenges and possibilities in the partnerships, (b) investigating preservice and novice teachers' perceptions of the partnerships, and (c) examining cooperating teachers' views of the partnerships. Data collection and analysis included observations, e-journals, and reflective writing prompts over a four-week period. Findings indicated that the school-university partnerships were essential features in the university students' occupational socialization and in the conservation of cooperating teachers' calling to teach. Distinct challenges of the partnerships included preparatory work for the cooperating teachers, limited time in the field, and unanticipated interruptions for novice teachers. This report details findings from this study along with implications for navigating collaborations between school music programs and university methods courses.

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School-university partnerships (SUPs) are collaborative efforts between schools and universities that can engender productivity and amity among stakeholders. Often, music education faculty members and school music teachers combine their resources (e.g., students, time, energy) to create a working partnership that, through proper cultivation, benefits participants on several levels. The majority of SUPs in music education includes an emphasis on preservice teacher development. Research devoted to SUP models has sparked discussion surrounding several themes. These include the benefits and challenges of establishing partnerships (Burton & Greher, 2007, 2009; Conkling & Henry, 1999; Conkling, 2007; Henry, 2001; Peters, 2002; Robinson, 2001), the need for defined roles within partnerships (Bresler, 2002; Burton & Greher, 2007), the values associated with teaching and learning (Alexander, 2003; Bresler, 2001, 2002), and the importance of preservice teacher socialization (Alexander, 2003; Conkling, 2004; Conkling & Henry, 2002; Johnston, Wetherill, High, & Greenebaum, 2002).

Educational organizations initially encouraged partnerships between schools and universities in the 1980s. Organizations such as the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy (1986), and the Holmes Group (1986) questioned the quality of teacher education in the United States. As part of their recommendations, the Holmes Group (1986) suggested the creation of Professional Development Schools (PDSs), or partnerships schools, to lead teacher education reform. Subsequent researchers enacted follow-up measures based on doubts that teacher education included a focus on the connection between theory and practice (Goodlad, 1991) and the need for quality teachers aware of social complexities in each classroom (Darling-Hammond, 1997). PDS models evolved to include emphasis on

partnerships that maximized student learning, highlighted exemplary teaching practices, promoted professional development, and generated effective new teachers (Abdal-Haqq, 1989).

PDS structures in general education, however, might be incongruous to those found in music education. Conkling and Henry (1999) noted obstacles involved with developing and sustaining partnerships in music education. The authors found that many traditional PDS goals were unrealistic for music teacher education and attributed this departure to fewer numbers of music teachers in schools. Consequently, Conkling and Henry proposed a change in terminology to Professional Development Partnerships (PDPs), which reflected the collaborative process of partnerships rather than the permanence of interns in most PDS models. Many music education partnerships today vary in structure, can be formally or informally conceived, and typically involve collaborations between university professors, preservice music teachers, cooperating teachers, and P-12 students (Burton & Greher, 2007).

Arts Education Policy Review featured a series of articles that focused on unique aspects of several SUP models in general music (Abrahams, 2011), instrumental music (Hunter, 2011; Kruse, 2011), urban education (Abrahams, 2011; Carlisle, 2011), music technology (Greher, 2011), and international settings (Burton, 2011). Additionally, Brophy's (2011) survey status report of SUPs across the United States indicated that most collaborators perceived their partnerships as personal, not institutional, and that maintaining partnerships required an extraordinary amount of time. According to the survey responses, the notable benefits of SUPs included increased effectiveness of programs, professional development, and collegiality with local teachers (Brophy, 2011).

Challenges associated with SUPs included conflicts in scheduling, time, and communication (Brophy, 2011). Among the sequence of articles was a consistent call for more research from specific settings and further examination of various facets of SUPs that might lead to improved music teacher preparation through "re-envisioning" teachers' futures in education (Burton & Greher, 2011, p. 105). In response to this appeal, this research project endeavored to highlight two such school-university partnerships that have formed between an instrumental music education methods course at a Southern university and two school band programs in a metropolitan area.

As previously discussed, extant research has underscored the benefits and challenges of SUPs in music education (Abrahams, 2011; Brophy, 2011; Burton & Greher, 2007, 2009; Conkling & Henry, 1999, 2002). There is a need, however, for additional research studies that capture the contextual qualities of existing SUPs. Formal examinations such as this might complement existing program evaluations and aid in the realization of the potential and possibilities of navigating SUPs in music education. Thus, the purpose of this research was to examine the inner workings of two school-university partnerships. The specific objectives of this study were to (a) explore the inherent challenges and possibilities in the current partnerships, (b) investigate preservice and novice teachers' perceptions of the partnerships, and (c) examine cooperating teachers' views of the partnerships.

Method

Participants

The impetus for this study originated from a systemic examination of two school-university partnerships with which the researcher was affiliated (Kruse, 2011). These partnerships were connected to an instrumental methods course that was designed for college seniors about to enter student teaching. The purpose of the class was to familiarize preservice instrumental music teachers with instructional techniques and strategies specific to middle school band settings, including repertoire, rehearsal objectives, creative lesson planning, and knowledge related to adolescent development. A central component of the course involved on-site teaching modules in two separate school districts near the university. During the course of the semester, preservice teachers gained hands-on experience through conducting and rehearsing seventh, eighth, and ninth grade band students using a variety of pedagogical materials. As the class instructor, the researcher's role was to promote structure and facilitate dialogue between the cooperating teachers, school students, and university students. Therefore, this study served as a continued investigation of the functionality and health of the aforementioned partnerships.

Four partnership stakeholders, 3 female and 1 male, participated in the study. The central purpose was to collect perceptions along a continuum—that of two experienced cooperating teachers, a novice teacher, and a student teacher—so the researcher could document characteristics of the partnerships in a diverse fashion using multiple vantage points. Participants included Margaret and Cathy, both cooperating teachers; Lisa, a second-year teacher and a former university student in the instrumental methods course;

and Adam, a student teacher who was in the instrumental methods course the semester before the study. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to the participants in order to ensure anonymity. Because these individuals had first-hand experience with the contextual learning associated with the SUPs, it was reasonable to assume that their perceptions might hold relative truth in shaping their future experiences with students.

Design

This study used a traditional descriptive case study design (Yin, 2003) to explore the perceptions of four participants in various stages of their teaching careers. While the researcher cannot generalize results from a small number of cases, focusing on the participants' unique insights regarding their roles as SUP stakeholders served as the most suitable foundation for examining the boundaries of two partnerships within one university methods class. Furthermore, the researcher brought an emic perspective to the study through his dual roles as researcher and class instructor. As an insider to the inner workings of the partnerships, the researcher sought to both acknowledge and minimize researcher bias by encouraging the participants to reflect only on their experiences in the field and to disregard any evaluative stances on university coursework as a whole. While it was not possible to completely eliminate the researcher's insider knowledge and resulting bias from the study, this perspective might also have added legitimacy to the findings and to resultant discourse surrounding this topic.

Throughout the four-week study, the researcher derived inferences from traditional qualitative data collection techniques such as participant-observations, e-journal entries, and reflective writing prompts (see Appendix). Data sources included field notes from observations, writing samples, and e-journal responses, all of which

targeted the participants' attitudes regarding the lasting contributions of their SUP experiences. Trustworthiness strategies included member checks, peer review, and triangulation through multiple data sources. The researcher sent e-journals and writing prompts to the participants, who were given the opportunity to edit their responses to maintain the accuracy of their statements. Finally, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to the participants in order to ensure anonymity.

Findings

Following analysis that included category matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1984), four main themes and 12 codes emerged from the combined data sources. These themes and their respective codes were Role Taking (modeling, transformation, teaching persona), Limitations of the Experience (coursework, time, schedule), Service (giving back to the profession, effective feedback as service), and Impact on Teaching (assumptions about learning, preparation, lessons learned, advice). The following journal entries and writing prompt excerpts highlight each of the aforementioned themes and represent only the most salient portions of the data.

Role Taking

The transformation from student to teacher is a recurring thread of discussion in preservice music teacher education. In the beginning stages of teaching, this transformation involves assuming a convincing teaching persona. Lisa, a second-year teacher, recounted the student-to-teacher paradigm shift she witnessed in her peers during partnership teaching episodes. For Lisa, this served as a socializing agent that reinforced the notion of adopting the role of teacher.

> The most intriguing aspect was watching the transition of my peers between the roles of student and teacher. Most had a more authoritative presence as a teacher, and it aided their success on the podium. Whether this change was innate or a conscious effort (like it was on my part), I do not know. Nonetheless, it was evident that a change had occurred between the two roles, and I found my peers' adaptive natures to be completely captivating. Thus, the capability for teachers to rise to the occasion, even under pressure, will always amaze me (Lisa, journal entry, February 12, 2010).

Adam, a student teacher, spoke to the role of modeling sincerity in one's teaching persona and how this can influence teacher-student relationships. Additionally, he spoke to the "clinical"—yet necessary—manner of gaining teaching experience prior to student teaching.

> In order to relate to students (or people in general), one must be sincere. If you are not genuinely interested in your students, then any attempt to make the lessons worthwhile will fall on deaf ears. Students can see through a teacher faking enthusiasm…Before doctors and architects complete school, they are required to complete a residency. Other professions have similar training programs. Teachers should have the same opportunities (Adam, journal entry, February 9, 2010).

Intrinsic matters, such as personally held mantras, philosophies, and assumptions can expedite or arrest assuming the character or role of teacher. Such attitudes warrant careful, responsible scrutiny by preservice music teachers, as they pose a threat to teacher role construction if left unexamined. In response to this, Cathy, a cooperating teacher, took a generalist stance and simply shared, "Believe from the beginning that you must love kids more than you love music (Cathy, writing prompt, February 13, 2010). Similarly, Margaret, the second cooperating teacher, cited the larger implications of creating better human beings in the music classroom through adopting an altruistic teaching role, stating, "I hope that they [the university students] have a powerful impact

not only on my students' playing but on my students' lives as well. It is not just about the 'Music'" (Margaret, journal entry, February 15, 2010).

Limitations of the Experience

Inevitable friction can exist between the content knowledge gained in university methods courses and the contextual richness associated with practical teaching experiences in music classrooms. Often, novice teachers do not discover the subtleties of classroom interactions until they begin navigating independent teaching episodes. Lisa, however, acknowledged the limitations of connecting theory and practice during undergraduate preparation and alluded to the "insulated" experiences often associated with on-site teaching modules.

> In general, more emphasis is placed on musical knowledge than interpersonal relationships within the school environment. While knowledge is an applicable trait for any teacher, an inadvertent focus on only ideal situations is entirely too limiting. There is a need for college students to experience the not-so-pretty aspects of teaching (such as unsupportive administrators, unruly students, or belligerent parents) other than during student teaching, when they are typically "protected" from such heated situations (Lisa, journal entry, February 12, 2010).

From an experienced teacher's perspective, Margaret noted the limitations of methods classes in elucidating realities of teaching and cited the importance of student teaching in solidifying novice teachers' awareness of classroom culture.

> I believe that the university coursework does not always prepare the college students for their internship [student teaching]. The time management and organizational *learning* takes place during the student teaching time. That's fine, as long as they learn it at some point. The realities of teaching may begin in [this] class, but for sure hit them as they student teach (Margaret, journal entry, February 15, 2010).

Additional limitations noted by the participants included travel time to the schools, scheduling conflicts, and unpredictability of daily agendas, all of which had a bearing on the novice teachers' perceived quality of individual teaching segments. One or more of the aforementioned variances left the students feeling "frantic," "insecure," less focused, and less likely to successfully recover lessons following disruptions. Another consideration that arose was the fear of "using" the school band students. As Adam shared, "The band students have to be patient with us as we try to find our footing in a new classroom. They also may have a hard time adjusting to the constant changing of rehearsal pace" (Adam, writing prompt, February 9, 2010). Lisa further extended this particular quandary.

> I always sensed that the band students felt "used," and I empathized with their position. I think a simple solution would be to encourage the college students to encompass the entire classroom (like veteran teachers) instead of confining themselves to the podium (Lisa, journal entry, February 12, 2010).

Service

All of the participants noted the service component in the partnerships and in the overall landscape of music teaching and learning. While Margaret and Cathy viewed their role in the partnerships as service to the profession and toward the socialization of the university students, Adam and Lisa recognized this service and aspired to do the same for others when such opportunities arose. "My revelation has been that teaching is a service, and it has given me a different, more providential outlook on the profession" (Lisa, journal entry, February 12, 2010). Cathy's notion of service included imparting to her students the importance of their role in the partnership. "My students love the [university] days. They have been taught that they are providing a service for future band students by

helping their future directors become better teachers" (Cathy, journal entry, February 13, 2010).

Another type of service Adam discerned was receiving caring, constructive, and consistent feedback from the cooperating teachers. To Adam, this reflected their dedication to teaching students of any age and to the enculturation of preservice teachers.

> Throughout the entire experience, the co-operating teachers did an excellent job of giving us a glimpse at the real world. They did not hide anything from us, and during discussions, the co-operating teachers let us know about some real issues facing music educators. This is so important (Adam, journal entry, February 9, 2010).

Impact on Teaching

According to participant accounts, the impact on teaching was a substantive byproduct of engaging in partnership collaborations. Lisa believed that working with the band directors and receiving advice on how to navigate specific rehearsal concepts and classroom situations was gratifying. In fact, she attributed on-site teaching to her success as a second-year inservice teacher.

> The on-site classes launched an understanding of my teaching persona and helped me identify personal strengths and weaknesses. Thus, the very foundation of my career was initiated through on-site classes. In addition, they acted as a springboard into my professional development by introducing and incorporating enhanced evaluation techniques that I still use today (Lisa, journal entry, February 12, 2010).

For Adam, acquiring a realistic impression of his teaching style emerged as a salient result of the partnerships. Through this, he gained an appreciation for lesson planning as well as relating positively to middle school students.

> At a practical level, I have learned that I talk too much during rehearsals. More playing needs to occur and I should keep explanations short and simple…I have learned that I can

> improvise when the lesson plan does not always go according to plan. However, I need to further develop this skill and realize that the lesson plan is only a guide… This experience has opened up my mind to consider their [students'] perspectives when teaching. It has been a while since I was in middle school and [I] had lost touch with that perspective. To be able to relate to them again has been very insightful (Adam, writing prompt, February 9, 2010).

As a cooperating teacher, Margaret noted that the university students impacted her teaching in that they reminded her of the importance of clear conducting gestures and of the fresh enthusiasm typically displayed by preservice teachers. Margaret's words also allude to reciprocity, which is one of the desired goals of collaborative partnerships.

> Watching the [university] students has made me be more specific with my hands [conducting]. I have tried to remember what it was like when I first started teaching. I need to reclaim the youthful enthusiasm I see in the [university] students that I once had myself. In other words, I shouldn't let the daily grind get to me (Margaret, journal entry, February 15, 2010)

Assumptions about student learning also can impact teaching and can surface as preservice teachers gain an increased awareness of pedagogy. Cathy communicated some assumptions that she noticed among the university students.

> One might assume 9th graders would be at a certain level fundamentally, but each class is different…It is much harder for a [university] student to discover that immediately. Their lesson plans often assume that the [high school] students know things that they don't. This is one of the biggest "eye-openers" that the [university] students experience. They also learn to assume that every class they teach in the future will be as well behaved and eager to listen to them as the 9th graders here. This can lead to assumptions that they do not need to learn classroom management skills, only musical skills (Cathy, journal entry, February 13, 2010).

An additional byproduct of the partnership experience impacted middle school students' opportunities for teaching the university students. Margaret observed this phenomenon, partly due to the number of student conductors with whom the band students worked.

> My students have to "stay on their toes," watch and listen carefully, and focus. The variety is a good break from their routine with me and the other directors. Oddly enough, my students enjoy helping the [university] students on their secondary instruments: "You're squeaking because…," "Firm up your corners…," etc. For sure when you have to teach someone, you get better yourself (Margaret, writing prompt, February 15, 2010).

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine the inner workings of two school-university partnerships. The specific objectives of this study were to (a) explore the inherent challenges and possibilities in the current partnerships, (b) investigate preservice and novice teachers' perceptions of the partnerships, and (c) examine cooperating teachers' views of the partnerships. Below are interpretations of the findings from this study, followed by implications for strengthening and supporting collaborations between school music programs and university methods courses.

The first aspect of the study centered on the perceived rewards and challenges associated with the partnerships. According to the informants, the SUPs served as valuable, essential features in the university students' occupational socialization and in the conservation of cooperating teachers' calling to teach. While Lisa and Adam cited being in front of students in rehearsal settings as one of the most pivotal opportunities for reinforcing content knowledge learned in methods course, Cathy and Margaret witnessed

university students' shift in being aware of their surroundings and addressing students' needs. These perceptions corroborate previous findings (Abrahams, 2011; Brophy, 2011; Burton & Greher, 2009; Conkling, 2007; Henry, 2001; Robinson, 2001) and allude to psychosocial benefits of SUPs. These benefits include understanding middle school student learning tendencies, interpreting the subtleties of student responses, and modifying lesson pacing for greater focus. Conversely, some of the most noticeable challenges included a significant amount of preparatory work for the cooperating teachers, limited time in the field, and unanticipated interruptions for the preservice teachers at the partnerships schools (Brophy, 2011). Because time in the field each day was relatively short—one to two hours, twice per week—teaching segments tended to be short due to the number of university students in the class. While cooperating teachers attempted to minimize podium congestion, some students inevitably faced little to no teaching time, depending on the day. Unexpected changes to school schedules due to activities such as fire drills, pep assemblies, picture days, and class trips further limited teaching time for university students. Though band rehearsals did not consistently maintain an optimal format, this inconsistency reflected many of the emblematic disruptions in public school settings. These disruptions served as effective lessons for the preservice teachers by exemplifying what their future lives as public school music teachers might entail. Burton and Greher (2007, 2009) and Brophy (2011) chronicled similar concerns in their research.

The second aspect of the study focused on preservice and novice teachers' perceptions of the partnerships. Lisa and Adam attributed much of their emergent comfort in teaching to their experiences provided by on-site teaching experiences. They

reported positive acknowledgements of several partnership characteristics, the most prominent being an increased awareness of teacher role identity, the notion of mentorship, and opportunities to teach "real" students in authentic contexts. Together, these elements not only encouraged their transition from student to teacher but also accelerated their awareness of this process. As a second-year teacher, Lisa continually reflected on her time in the methods course and noted unlimited rewards working with students; for her, the time constraints mentioned above became a mere afterthought. Additionally, she critically considered whether she could reach internal connections in students despite differences in backgrounds, prior knowledge, or school contexts. This type of discernment might signal an evolving teaching persona (Abrahams, 2011; Burton & Greher, 2009; Conkling, 2004). Similarly, Adam realized how quickly band directors must think and react when diagnosing unexpected problems during rehearsal, skills that he endeavored to hone as a student teacher. There were, however, expressed concerns over whether the school band students felt "used" during teaching episodes. As such, school students' patience in adapting to multiple teaching styles might warrant further examination with regard to partnership reciprocity (Burton & Greher, 2007, 2009).

The final aspect of these findings focused on the cooperating teachers' views of the partnerships. Like Lisa and Adam, Margaret and Cathy expressed a positive outlook toward the collaborations. Some of the most salient responses aligned with service and the notion of giving back to the profession. Margaret and Cathy promoted examining oneself in an attempt to better understand one's students, a responsibility they hoped their "future colleagues" would acquire by being around their band students. Margaret and Cathy were rejuvenated by working with the preservice teachers and admitted to "stealing

rehearsal tricks" for their own purposes. This appeared to be another example of how stakeholders negotiated reciprocity within the partnerships. Finally, the cooperating teachers supported the partnerships because the contextual teaching served as a meaningful precursor to student teaching, thus shattering several of the "idealistic" assumptions held by university students. Because the preservice teachers were ultimately responsible for their own level of success, Margaret and Cathy saw their role in the partnerships as positively shaping future generations of band directors and their students.

While the aforementioned findings may not be generalizable to other settings, music teacher educators and cooperating teachers might use this information, in part, as a way to support and strengthen collaborations between school music programs and university methods courses. The transferability of methods course content knowledge to contextual school settings is a paramount endeavor in music teacher education programs. While several of the participants' narratives in this study resonated with previous findings (Brophy, 2011; Burton & Greher, 2007; Conkling, 2007; Henry, 2001; Robinson, 2001), these accounts might help substantiate the rewards and challenges that the majority of stakeholders commonly experience in functioning partnerships.

Implications based on this research and other studies might include creating mutually beneficial schedules to maximize on-site experiences among stakeholders. To increase reciprocity, faculty members and university students could support cooperating teachers by attending school concerts, facilitating clinics, or providing additional assistance as needed. Incorporating school students' ideas of partnership operations is an additional consideration that might give equal voice to participants. Furthermore, partnership alumni could be invited to return as guest speakers in order to discuss the

transition from preservice teacher, to student teacher, to inservice teacher. A next step in this line of inquiry would be to launch descriptive studies—both qualitative and quantitative—that document the development of expertise (Alexander, 2003), reciprocity strategies, or longitudinal looks at partnerships (Burton & Greher, 2009). Through considering these findings, faculty members, school music teachers, and preservice teachers might gain insight toward the feasibility of establishing, building, and sustaining school-university partnerships, thus striving to balance theoretical content knowledge with contextual-relevant classroom experiences.

Appendix

Sample Writing Prompts

What were your initial thoughts when you discovered you were going to be involved in an on-site instrumental methods course? What did you anticipate?

What were some of your initial impressions at the beginning of the partnerships?

- How did you initially respond to the materials/information presented at the start?
- What was intriguing? What was intimidating?
- How have your initial impressions changed, if at all?
- What new questions do you have regarding your role as a teacher?

What have been the most rewarding experiences thus far?

- What have the students taught you? What have you learned from them?
- What have you learned about your peers, colleagues, and faculty members?
- What have you learned about yourself?
- Describe your perceptions of the mentoring process (co-ops, faculty, or peers) and the level of accountability that was placed on you.

What have been the most challenging aspects of being in school-university partnerships thus far?

- What new conflicts do you see in education and teaching?
- How have you dealt with tensions or discrepancies during your time in the field?
- What would you do differently in the future?

In what ways, if any, do you believe this experience has impacted/will impact your teaching?

- How might this experience impact your relationships with future students?
- What has this experience revealed to you about the teacher's role(s) in the music classroom? The students' role(s)? In what ways, if any, have these roles been redefined for you?
- What new "tricks" have you learned about relating to students/people?
- What are you sure of <u>now</u> that you weren't when the partnerships first started?

What would you recommend to future university students in this course? Future co-ops? Future school band members?

- What should they be prepared for?
- How might they grow from this kind of experience?
- Should our partnerships continue? Is it too much work? Is it worth it?
- Are there better, more effective ways of getting similar experiences?

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