

## Key Elements of Preparation and Transition for an Instrumental Major Teaching Elementary General Music

By

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this case study was to describe the experience of a first year music educator teaching outside of his specialization. The participant, Joseph, had completed an instrumental music education degree and, at the time of the study, was teaching elementary general music. Research questions were designed to investigate how Joseph navigated the differences between his expected employment prior to graduation and the realities of his current teaching position, as well as the critical experiences he considered to be most relevant to his preparedness for achieving success in his current job. Implications for music teacher educators include the importance of discussing the realities of the job market, incorporating activities that develop self-efficacy, and providing authentic-context learning experiences.*

**Keywords:** instrumental music, elementary general music, music teacher education, self-efficacy, preparedness, teaching specialization

## Introduction

*I sat at my computer on a warm, summer day to see an email appear in my inbox from Joseph (a pseudonym), a recent graduate of the university where I was completing my doctoral program. The email stated that in his search for employment, Joseph was a finalist for an elementary general music teaching position in the area; he was asking for suggestions about the lesson he would be teaching as part of the interview process. While happy to help, I was surprised that Joseph was applying for an elementary general music teaching position because he had been an instrumental major. Along with a few suggestions for his lesson, I wished Joseph the best and asked him to keep in touch regarding the outcome of his interview.*

In music teacher preparation programs, preservice educators are often required to declare a specialization such as instrumental, choral, or general music, or focus their course study on one age group, for example, secondary or elementary. After graduation, however, it is most common for music teachers to earn a K-12 or PK-12 music license (Groulx, 2015; Nixon May, Willie, Worthen, & Pehrson, 2016). With evidence of a large number of educators who have taught outside of their specialization at some point during their career (Conway, 2002; Corfield-Adams, 2012; Groulx, 2015; Robinson, 2010; Shouldice, 2013), it is important to consider the preparedness of teachers to work outside of their focus area. The current study investigated one music teacher's preparation and transition to teach outside of his specialization.

Music education undergraduates have been selecting a specialization, or focus area, during their teacher preparation programs since the 1950s (Kuhn, 1955). This system affects the courses students take, and the fieldwork they experience during their undergraduate preparation. Music teacher certification, however, has become increasingly broad. Researchers have examined licensure practices for many years (Erbes, 1987; Wolfe, 1972) and the number of

states offering a K-12 or PK-12 music license has been increasing. As of 2016, 40 states offer this general license. For 31 of the 40, K-12 or PK-12 music is the only certification available for music educators (Nixon May et al., 2016). The National Association of Schools of Music's (NASM, 2016) regulations indicate that students in music education programs in NASM-accredited schools must be prepared to teach in a variety of settings, further emphasizing the disconnect between preparation and licensure practices.

It is not uncommon for music educators to teach outside of their specialization at some point during their careers. While research has not been completed to explicitly determine how frequently this occurs, some researchers have found numerical evidence that documents this occurrence. For example, while examining the quality of undergraduate music education curriculum, Groulx (2015) found 82.86% of his 601 participants reported that they taught outside of their undergraduate focus area. A large portion of this sample, 72.14%, was ensemble directors who had transitioned to elementary general music. Over 60% of the participants who declared themselves as "nonchoir" reported teaching choral classes. Additional classes taught outside of individual focus areas included piano or keyboard, band, guitar, and strings. Other researchers have also observed teachers working outside of their specialization. Conway (2002) found four of her 14 participants taught at least one class outside of their specialization and Ballantyne (2006) reported one-third of her general music participants also worked with the instrumental programs at their schools.

The most common out-of-specialization teaching transition is to elementary general music (Groulx, 2015) and three researchers have specifically examined instrumentalists who have moved to this area. Robinson (2010) interviewed seven early-career teachers who specialized in band during their undergraduate programs and later worked in an elementary

general setting. Shouldice's (2013) one participant chose to student teach in an elementary general music setting although they began their undergraduate career as an instrumental major. Corfield-Adams (2012) investigated the impact the transition from instrumental music to elementary general music had on six participants' professional identities. These studies have created a foundation of research literature for examining instrumentalists working in elementary general music.

It is important to consider whether teachers are prepared to work outside of their specialization. Hamann and Ebie (2009) examined the preparedness of undergraduate music students to teach across disciplines of music. Concerns of teaching outside of one's specialization, reported by 90% of their participants, included not knowing enough specifics about additional content areas, and not being confident or knowledgeable enough to provide effective instruction and answer student questions. As the participants were still students at the time of the study, they felt that the methods courses they would complete during their undergraduate programs could provide them with the appropriate information and experiences to decrease their concerns. However, because they were not yet teachers, these participants did not know if the perceptions of their preparation would change once they entered the field.

Along with undergraduate preparation, two additional factors may influence music teachers' success while working outside of their specialization: teacher identity and self-efficacy. Teacher identity has been used as an approach to investigate music educators in the population of instrumentalists teaching elementary general music (Corfield-Adams, 2012), however, I have chosen instead to examine the experiences of my participant with a broader lens in order to gain an understanding of other factors that influenced their transition and success as an elementary general music teacher. Researchers have found that high levels of self-efficacy support success

for educators (Durkin, 2015; Giallo & Little, 2003). Self-efficacy, from psychologist Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, is defined as "the belief that one can master a situation and produce positive outcomes" (Santrock, 2004, p. 226). This quality allows an individual to approach challenging situations, such as teaching in a new specialization, with the belief they will succeed.

Researchers have indicated that a large number of music teachers work outside of their specializations, however, limited research has been done to investigate this transition and the aspects of preparedness that are necessary to succeed in teaching in a new focus area. The purpose of this case study was to describe the experience of a first year music educator teaching outside of their specialization. Research questions included:

- 1) How has the participant navigated differences between their expected employment prior to graduation and the realities of their current teaching position?
- 2) What critical experiences and personal characteristics does the participant consider most relevant to their preparedness for achieving success in their current job?

### **Methodology**

An instrumental case study is a methodological approach used to explore a real-life, contemporary issue through a bounded case that exemplifies the concern (Creswell, 2013). I chose this approach in order to focus on one individual who identified as an instrumental major during their undergraduate teacher preparation who was working in an elementary general music setting at the time of the study. I found the participant through opportunistic sampling; I knew them prior to the study and then became interested in investigating the case of instrumentalists teaching elementary general music through their story.

## **Participant**

By Grade 3, Joseph had become involved with instrumental ensembles and private lessons, an interest that continued through high school. During his undergraduate teacher preparation program, he declared himself an instrumental major and completed the coursework related to this track. His student teaching focused on this specialization as he worked with Grades 6-12 bands and orchestras.

Joseph graduated from his undergraduate institution in May of 2015 and was working in his first job as a music teacher at the time of the study. Although his specialization was instrumental music, Joseph was teaching general music to students in Kindergarten through Grade 2 children in a part-time position. His classes took place weekday afternoons and in his extra time, he taught private instrumental lessons, and performed with a local rock band. He also continued to perform on his main instrument with classical ensembles in the area.

## **Ethical Considerations**

I met Joseph prior to the commencement of this study when I was the teaching assistant for his undergraduate general music methods course during the fall of his senior year and my first semester as a PhD student. After the conclusion of the course, we would see one another on campus, and maintained email communication as he progressed in his job search after graduation. At the time of the study, I was in the spring semester of my second year of my doctoral program.

My insider status may have helped to establish rapport with the participant, but also required me to address researcher bias prior to the beginning of the study. It was possible that Joseph would discuss benefits or concerns of his undergraduate preparation, including the course that I was involved in, during the interview portion of data collection. In order to diminish

Joseph's potential discomfort or avoidance of important considerations during our interviews, I provided him with the interview questions prior to our conversations, which allowed him to prepare his answers. I encouraged him to share feedback via email or other written forms if he felt more comfortable with a different method of communication. He was also able to choose not to answer certain questions. I reminded him that participation would not compromise his relationship with the university, and my using a pseudonym would protect his identity and lack of identification of his specific primary instrument.

### **Setting**

Data collection took place at the school where Joseph worked, an elementary school located in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city. The school system was known throughout the state for the quality education it provided, and it served a diverse population of students. Joseph's classroom was located near the entrance of the school and the main office. The class I observed during my first visit was already in progress when I arrived. The students sat around a large rug placed in the center of the room. They enthusiastically focused on Joseph as he led them through the words and sign language of a piece of music they would be performing during an upcoming program. The room was organized, colorful, and spacious, with cupboards and shelves lining the back and side walls. Throughout the observations, Joseph used resources such as xylophones, drums, an electric keyboard, a guitar, a stereo system, and a computer with a projector (field notes, March 3, 2016).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection consisted of interviews and classroom observations. Two one-hour semi-structured interviews took place in the second half of Joseph's first year of teaching. I recorded each interview, and transcribed the files using ExpressScribe software. I transcribed the first

interview shortly after it took place in order to generate the second round of interview questions and determine any items that needed clarification from the first interview. During the two one-hour classroom observations, I acted as an observer and took notes using Creswell's (2013) observation protocol (see p. 169), which I later expanded into narrative field notes. Although the period of data collection was brief, my previous relationship with the participant helped me to establish rapport quickly, and I was able to acquire a rich snapshot of the situation.

I coded the interviews and field notes using HyperResearch with terms from the literature including "certification," "challenges to teaching elementary general music," "reasons for taking job," and "student teaching." I compared the frequency of codes as well as their relevance to the research questions to establish four themes. To validate my analysis, I provided Joseph with the transcripts and initial analysis for member checking. He confirmed the accuracy of these documents with no revisions. I completed a peer review process by asking two colleagues to review portions of my interview transcripts and coding. They suggested no changes or modifications.

## **Results**

Joseph appeared to enjoy his elementary general music teaching position, and spoke positively about his growth as an educator during his first year of teaching. Although it was not the job he had initially hoped for, Joseph was able to identify how he had navigated his unexpected transition to teaching outside of his specialization. He was also aware of various aspects of his undergraduate preparation and personal characteristics that allowed him to feel successful in his work.

## **Realities of the Job Search**

Prior to graduation, Joseph imagined his ideal job to be a position similar to his student teaching scenario, but he quickly discovered that might not happen:

So when I was looking for jobs that was kind of my ideal. If I could get into a 6-12 instrumental program either being an assistant director, or being at the helm, that would be pretty awesome. And that didn't happen. (personal communication, March 3, 2016)

Joseph was forthcoming about the challenges he faced when searching for his first teaching job. Some of his struggles related to having a limited geographical area within which to search for work. "I had applied to quite a few jobs. I didn't really feel geographically bound, but financially I didn't have the money to pick up and relocate. So I looked in the area" (personal communication, March 3, 2016).

Other limitations existed simply because of the jobs that were available at the time he graduated and was looking for work. He found that most of the open positions were not in instrumental music. "The majority of my job interviews were general music. Out of the five final round interviews I went to, only one of them was for an instrumental job and the other four were for K-5 music" (personal communication, March 3, 2016). With limited options in the area, Joseph decided to expand his search to include general music positions.

## **Personal Attributes**

Two personal attributes were present in Joseph's discussion related to both his decision to work outside of his specialization, as well as his feelings of success in teaching elementary general music: flexibility and self-efficacy. The idea of being flexible was something that Joseph had established during his undergraduate preparation:

I felt relatively confident in my abilities through my coursework in college that if you throw me into band, I'm going to do well. If you throw me into general music, I'm going to do well. It might not be my cup of tea, it might not be what I

feel most comfortable at, but at the same core it's still teaching music, and I'm going to do well at that. (personal communication, March 3, 2016)

Joseph realized the importance of flexibility in both the job search and his first teaching position as well. After acknowledging he would most likely not find an instrumental teaching position he recalled, "I just told myself I had to be ready for anything. I think what really changed my perspective is that I knew that if I was going to be picky I wasn't going to get a job" (personal communication, March 3, 2016). He continued to use his flexibility as he began his first job, and was faced with a multitude of new classroom circumstances and teaching scenarios.

Joseph exhibited a strong sense of self-efficacy that allowed him to persevere during the challenges he faced as a first year teacher working outside of his specialization. He made several comments about turning challenges into learning experiences:

I grew up with the idea and the philosophy of this is the hand you're dealt, you need to make the best out of it, and every single thing that you approach you need to take a learning experience from it because it's going to propel you to the next thing. So I think that's really how I've approached this year. (personal communication, March 15, 2016)

Joseph also spoke explicitly about using this self-assuredness to remain positive. "I have to come into school and I've got to tell myself that I rock. There are days that I don't, and I know that I don't, and I'm just lying through my teeth but I have to tell myself that," (personal communication, March 3, 2016). Although Joseph used this, at times mustered, confidence, it allowed him to continue to succeed and open pathways for reflection. He told me about a conversation he had with his mentor teacher:

My mentor teacher asked me a wonderful question. She asked me point blank, "Do you think your confidence pisses people off?" To which I said, "Well, I know it has for a few people." And her response was, "I'm sure it has, but that shouldn't stop you from being confident. Because if you're not confident in yourself, you're not going to be able to do this job, and you're doing a fine job so far because you're coming in every day and telling yourself you can do it. And then at the end

of the day, when you realize you either did or didn't, you sit back and go, 'What do I need to do differently?'" (personal communication, March 15, 2016).

It was clear from my observations of Joseph's teaching that he had a high level of self-efficacy in the classroom. This was evident in his musical abilities as he transitioned among several instruments, props, and pieces of technology throughout the lessons. It was also demonstrated in his demeanor. As a novice teacher, he maintained high expectations for student behavior and successfully implemented various methods of classroom management (field notes, March 3, 2016).

### **Professional Relationships**

When discussing the experiences that best prepared Joseph for his job, he commonly referred to people. He discussed professional relationships with teachers and colleagues that had been integral aspects of his musical journey. For example, he mentioned those who influenced his choice to become a music educator and the colleagues who guided him through the challenging aspects of his first year of teaching.

Joseph's high school music teacher guided him toward a career in music education. As he considered becoming a professional performer, he approached his high school director:

And she, who had been using me in leadership positions, teaching younger kids, asked me if I had thought about [a local university] and thought about music education. And I said, "No, not really." And she posed a question to me that, I think, was the pivotal thing. She asked really what I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing with music. Did I want to spend the rest of my life in a room working by myself or spend my life in a room working with others. I wanted to work with people. (personal communication, March 3, 2016)

Once hired at his current position, Joseph connected with colleagues who supported him through his first year of teaching. The teacher who had held his job for 26 years prior to Joseph was still teaching in the district. She provided him with resources such as repertoire, books, and

instruments, and guided him through the logistics of the job. Joseph also reached out to the other music teachers in the school district for professional support.

Perhaps the most influential professional relationship leading to Joseph's success was his mentor teacher. She was especially helpful concerning his transition to teaching the elementary age group:

She's a first grade teacher and she's been here for 27 years. She is the veteran of the veterans. She has seen it all. And she comes in and observes my class and sees things that I do see, but she sees them in a way that I can't see them. And she has opened me up to so much experience of just how do you deal with kids at this age. She has been amazing in just helping me get used to what teaching this age group is like. No she doesn't know all of the music stuff, at the same rate, I don't think she has to. I can say to my mentor teacher, "I don't know how this works in elementary. I know how this works at the upper level, what do I do? I'm lost." (personal communication, March 3, 2016)

It was clear from my observations that Joseph had gained an understanding of the elementary age group partly due to working with his mentor teacher. He utilized a variety of presentation modes and activities for the students. To encourage the students to meet his high expectations, he used developmentally appropriate methods. Although each music class was 60-minutes in length, Joseph's students maintained focus, respect, and enthusiasm for the majority of the class period, with only a few instances requiring redirection (field notes, March 3, 2016).

### **Undergraduate Preparation**

Joseph felt that the most significant preparation for taking an elementary general music teaching position was the general methods course he had taken during his undergraduate program:

I wouldn't have felt comfortable looking for a K-5 job if I did not have general music methods. That class was such a tool belt class for me. If it weren't for that class I would have felt nowhere near comfortable with teaching this age group. (personal communication, March 2, 2015)

Specific experiences that Joseph mentioned as being valuable during general methods included discussions regarding the cognitive and vocal development of young children, working with administration, and classroom management, as well as authentic-context learning activities of observations, peer teaching, and lesson planning.

An additional undergraduate experience which lead Joseph to success was student teaching. Although not placed in a general music setting, his cooperating teachers largely influenced Joseph's preparedness for difficult teaching situations. "The reason I think I am flourishing here is because both of my cooperating teachers did not hold back in their feedback, they didn't hold back in just throwing me into things" (interview March 15, 2016). For example, Joseph shared with me that on his second day of student teaching one of his cooperating teachers gave him an orchestral score by and said that he would be rehearsing the full ensemble the next afternoon.

I asked Joseph if any of his undergraduate professors had talked to him about the possibility of teaching outside of instrumental music. He told me, "I don't think the idea was ever presented in a really positive way, honestly. But the professor kind of reasoned it as, well, you never know when [teaching outside of your focus area] is going to happen" (personal communication, March 15, 2016). Although he had mostly positive undergraduate experiences and was doing well in his elementary general music teaching position, he felt he had been unprepared to teach outside of his specialization.

### **Discussion**

Although Joseph's story is not generalizable, consideration of his story could lead to improved preparation for preservice music teachers to teach in multiple areas of music. Several implications exist for music teacher educators. These include the need to discuss the reality of

the job market with undergraduate students, implement activities that support the development of self-efficacy, and provide students with authentic-context learning experiences in multiple areas of music education.

Joseph's difficulty in finding a job within his specialization was mainly due to the shortage of employment in his area of instrumental music within his geographic limitations. Corfield-Adams' (2012) respondents discussed similar difficulties. Several participants in their study reported that they began working in elementary general music because there were not instrumental music teaching positions available at the time and in the place they were looking for employment.

Lack of jobs in one's specialization may happen for several reasons. For example, it is becoming increasingly common for music teaching positions to combine multiple content areas of music, leading new teachers to work in their specialization along with another area of music. This may be a result of the expectations created by the broad licensure that most states endorse for music educators. Administrators often expect teachers with a K-12 or P-12 certification to have experience in all areas for which they are certified (Conway, 2002). A greater number of elementary jobs may also exist simply due to the fact that there are nearly twice as many students at the elementary level (Grades K-8) than enrolled as secondary students (Grades 9-12) (Kena et al., 2016).

Hamann and Ebie (2009) mentioned that participants in their study seemed to understand that working outside of their focus area was a possibility. While student teaching seminars are a likely place to discuss future teaching scenarios (Zeichner & Liston, 1987), it does not seem that the topic is directly addressed by teacher educators (Baumgartner & Council, 2017). Music

education instructors may want to consider if and how they are discussing the possibility of teaching outside of one's specialization with undergraduate students.

Joseph's strong sense of self-efficacy provided him the strength to approach various challenges through his degree program and first year of teaching as situations in which he could work to succeed. While some preservice students may not respond well to the methods used by Joseph's cooperating teachers, such as assigning him to lead a full rehearsal with little notice, Joseph seemed to appreciate it. He suggested that teacher preparation programs should incorporate challenging conversations and experiences based on the real-life expectations of teachers while students are still under the guidance of professors and cooperating teachers in order to develop self-efficacy among preservice and early-career music educators. Because of the experiences Joseph had with his cooperating teachers, he did not feel as much of the first year shock that other early career teachers report (Ballantyne & Packer, 2004). He commented that although there were certain things he did not learn during undergraduate preparation, he was more willing to face the challenges because he had succeeded during similar situations in the past. Teacher educators may consider Joseph's suggestion to provide more real world experiences in order to develop self-efficacy among preservice music educators.

Authentic-context learning experiences, such as observation and fieldwork, are additional opportunities to develop self-efficacy and have been recommended by researchers to include in preservice music educators' preparation programs (Brophy, 2002; Conway, 2012; 2002; Groulx, 2015; Hourigan & Scheib, 2009; Legette, 2013; 1999; Roulston, Legette, & Trotman Womack, 2005; Taylor, 1970; Teachout, 2004). Providing undergraduate students with authentic-context learning experiences in a range of music education environments may contribute to their success when teaching outside of their specialization. For example, Joseph was willing to take a job

outside of his specialization because of the elementary teaching experiences he had during his undergraduate teacher preparation program in general music methods. Other researchers (Robinson, 2010; Shouldice, 2013) have cited this course as influential in preparing instrumental teachers to work in elementary general music. Music teacher educators may want to consider how to incorporate a variety of authentic-context learning experiences within their methods courses.

It may also be important to address the status of research related to music teachers working outside of their specialization, as it is limited. The small number of studies on out-of-specialization teaching are mostly focused on the population of instrumental majors who have moved to teach elementary general music. Further research is needed to discover the vastness of teachers working outside of their specializations. Studies could also investigate the number of people associated with each specialization compared with the number of jobs that exist in each area. Future studies could begin to address transitions to and from other areas of music, such as vocal music, and whether the themes from the current research exist within a variety of situations.

Joseph's first year of teaching presented many challenges as well as a great deal of success and joy, however, he may not choose to remain an elementary general music teacher. At the time of the study, he discussed pursuing additional professional development opportunities in both instrumental and general music to ensure that all areas of his teaching improved. Joseph's experiences provide insight into the real life experiences of a music teacher who has pursued a teaching position outside of his specialization. He provided thoughtful reflections on how he approached the situation and his preparedness. Regardless of his career choices in the future,

Joseph will learn from every teaching situation he encounters because “whatever you put in my way I’m going to do my absolute best” (personal communication, March 3, 2016).

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