Learning to Teach: perspectives from beginning music teachers

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ABSTRACT This paper aims to discuss the perspectives of beginning music teachers, their mentor teachers and the supervisor/researcher as significant evidence in understanding the process of learning how to teach. The perspectives of all those included afford a special understanding of the process of beginning music teaching. This study draws attention to research reported in general education literature of beginning teacher induction and significantly, less relating to beginning music teaching [Verrastro, R. E. & Leglar, M. (1992) Music teacher education, in R. Colwell (Ed.) Handbook of Research on Music Teaching (MENC, Schirmer)]. The main aim was to identify what the concerns of beginning music teachers were and to analyse the data in relation to the developmental model of Fuller and Boun [Fuller, F. F. & Boun, O. H. (1975) Becoming a teacher, in K. Ryan (Ed.) Teacher Education: Seventy-Fourth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)]. The results are discussed in light of the Concerns Confrontation Conceptualisation (CCC) developed by Fuller and Boun in order to draw together the perspectives of those involved. The CCC as a model enables the discrepancies that arise from significant concerns to be analysed from a variety of perspectives. As a teacher educator this has been a reciprocal learning experience that will have an effect on my own practice. I have found that, in order to encourage a deeper level of interpretation and professional growth, beginning music teachers require supported and structured experiences.

Introduction

Formal training in education has existed in institutions of higher education for at least 100 years. The quality of that training has been varied and focused on what teachers need to know and how they can be trained. Little consideration has been given to what teachers know and how this knowledge is acquired (Carter, 1990).

Research in teacher education, and particularly regarding beginner teachers, is well documented with many studies investigating teacher education and teacher induction
programs. These include Hartnett and Naish (1980), Howey and Bents (1979), Hoffman et al. (1985), McCaleb (1984), McDonald (1980), McDonald and Elias (1982), Mitchell and Kerchner (1983), Newberry (1977), Ryan (1970), Tisher (1978) and Zeichner (1979, 1983). These studies have identified and explored the issues that beginning teachers have indicated impact upon their early teaching experience. The issues range from classroom discipline, motivating students, dealing with individual differences, assessing students’ work, relations with parents, organising class work, insufficient materials and supplies, and problems with individual students. However, few studies detail the concerns, if indeed there are any, of beginning music teachers.

According to Verrastro and Leglar (1992) research on music teacher education tends to fall into four categories: undergraduate music teacher education; music education for elementary classroom teachers; inservice education; and history and philosophy of music teacher education. Undergraduate music teacher education has generated the most studies which include topics such as predicting effectiveness in student teaching, the instructional process of undergraduate education (including many studies in the area of field experience), evaluating programmes, and attitudes towards music education (Anderson, 1987; Colman, 1979; Colwell, 1985; Krueger, 1987; Lofgren, 1974; Mountford, 1976).

Whilst music educators have tended to respond to recommendations and issues raised in other areas of educational research such as classroom management problems or multicultural music (Lundquist, 1973, Montague, 1988; Mumford, 1985), researchers have not pursued the concerns of beginning music teachers within a framework of formal research and as distinct from the general field of education. This study draws on published research in this general field of beginning teacher induction, and, less directly relating to beginning music teaching (Verrastro & Leglar, 1992).

**Purpose of the Study**

The intention of the study is to illuminate the perceptions held by beginning music teachers regarding how they learn to be teachers, and to address concerns that arise from their practicum (school-based teaching) experience. An intention of the study is that it will inform current and future practice.

**Context**

The overarching aim of the Bachelor of Music Education (BMusEd) degree at the University of Western Australia is to prepare students to become competent music specialists operating within a multi-arts, interdisciplinary and outcomes-based framework. The intention of the course is to provide students with knowledge of appropriate materials, teaching strategies and organisational skills necessary to become successful music educators. During the first 2 years of study, students in the BMusEd degree participate in a common 2-year programme with all students enrolled in courses of the School of Music. This includes musicianship studies, performance practice, ensemble activities, chamber music, the history of music, and composition studies. In the 3rd and 4th Years students who intend to be school music teachers take general education subjects, specialised music education subjects and complete at least 20 weeks of school observations and teaching practicum. The BMusEd graduate is qualified to teach classroom music at both primary and secondary levels.
Study Aims

The study sought to achieve two main aims:

1. To identify the concerns of beginning music teachers
2. To analyse the data in relation to the three-dimensional developmental model as detailed by Fuller (1969), and Fuller and Boun (1975), which defines beginning teachers concerns in sequential stages.

The first aim is based on two main projections: first, that music education theory can be enriched by exploring specific insights of teacher practitioners (in this case the beginning music teacher), and secondly, that their perceptions of their experience afford a special understanding of the process of beginning music teaching.

The second aim is to explore these teachers’ perceptions in the light of research findings regarding the concerns of beginning teachers and the notion of ‘survival’ (Fuller, 1969; Fuller & Boun, 1975). Further, the study aims to provide a framework for categorising and analysing the data from this study in order to discuss whether beginning music teachers display similar and/or different concerns to beginning teachers in general.

Participants

Participants in the study are BMusEd students, their mentor teachers and the university supervisor; 18 students and mentor teachers were invited to participate in a research study that would seek the perceptions of beginning music teachers’ concerns regarding learning how to teach. The author held the dual role of supervisor and researcher.

Of the 18 students invited to participate, half of the group accepted: eight female and one male student. At this point students were following an educational studies course prior to their first extended teaching practicum.

Study Design and Data Collection

Research methodology in the area of undergraduate music teacher education has explored both quantitative and qualitative approaches. But as Verrastro and Leglar (1992) summarise, quantitative designs for studies in the area of practicum experiences have been difficult to implement. There is a need to develop different methodologies to explore fully specific issues. This study was based on a desire to reproduce the lived reality of the participants. It assumed that individuals create their own social realities through interaction between self and society and that a qualitative approach would allow the researcher to get close to the experiences and perceptions of the researched. The data was collected using semi-structured questionnaires, interviews and non-participant observations.

The study occurred within the subjective domain of the participants and used their capacity for self-reflection within the unique experience of each participant. Sharing conceptions of teaching and learning would be essential to understanding how the beginning music teachers were making sense of their experience (Campbell, 1999; Stefani, 1997). To this end, teacher-talk, teacher-observation and teacher-narrative were considered to be appropriate ways in which to collect evidence. Further, there were benefits for the researcher and researched if both were able to describe and interpret significant experiences (Diamond, 1990; Lather, 1988, 1992). Dynamic interaction
between the student and researcher aimed ultimately to enable professional and personal growth.

Studies by Olsen (1987), and others such as the investigation of Hodkinson and Hodkinson (1999) involve the adoption of a stakeholder research model (Smith, 1989). Stakeholders are identified as categories of people who have legitimate personal and professional interests in the investigation. For this study, these were the beginning music teachers, school mentor teachers and the university supervisor/researcher.

A significant amount of data was collected for this study by the researcher (supervisor):

- tape recordings of semi-structured interviews, pre/post and during practicum;
- informal interviews during visits with mentor teachers;
- mentors’ written evaluations of their student.
- the supervisor’s field notes from observations of teaching.
- tape recordings of focus group meetings

The participating students attended the pre-practicum focus session and completed nine open-ended personal response questions. The written responses were seen only by the supervisor, thus ensuring confidentiality. The focus session was spent discussing two questions in some depth: what concerns they had prior to going out to schools, and how they could manage their concerns.

During the 4 weeks of the practicum each student received two visits from their supervisor (the researcher) who observed the teaching of two lessons. Mentor teachers were questioned as to the overall preparedness of the student teacher and asked to provide a short written evaluation of development over the period. At the completion of the practicum the students met again for a focus group discussion to reflect on their experience. A tape recording and subsequent transcript was made of this meeting and verified with the students.

In addition, students’ journals were a key element in facilitating and recording professional development. Students were asked to describe significant events by seeking not only their understanding of what happened but also the perspective of their mentor teacher. They were required to analyse what happened and redesign lessons and search for strategies that could be implemented when they were next in similar situations (see Table 2.). Keeping a journal was not only important for the study but also provided the student teachers with scope to reflect on what they experienced during their time in school, and direct their own learning. The journal was chosen in order to generate a narrative of the student’s thinking. Marble (1997) discusses narrative as the tool for ‘exploring teachers’ perspective’s on their culture, beliefs and actions’ (p. 55). He found that beginning teachers moved significantly toward ‘establishing their own unique identities as teachers by creating their own meaningful school stories’ (p. 63).

Analysis

Analysis was carried out initially by listening to the tape recordings of the focus groups, discussing perspectives with mentor teachers and carefully annotating field notes that were verified with the student teachers. As both the supervisor and researcher I was able to annotate lesson plans and discuss with the student teachers and mentor teachers my observations. The journals were also used for more detailed analysis and again, clarified with participants as appropriate. The sorting and analysis took into account the three categories: (i) concern with self, (ii) concern with teaching and (iii) concern with pupils
TABLE 1. Concerns confrontation conceptualisation: dimensions (after Fuller & Boun, 1975)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dimension 1: Internal self-evaluations</strong></td>
<td>The difference between what the teacher thinks they are doing and what they want to do = the satisfaction that the teacher will have themselves.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dimension 2: Self-observation</strong></td>
<td>The difference between what the teacher feels they are doing and what they are actually seen doing = realism, my awareness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dimension 3: External self-evaluation</strong></td>
<td>The third is about what the teacher actually does and what they wanted to do, evaluated by themselves.</td>
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(Fuller, 1969; Fuller & Boun, 1975). These aspects were considered with regards to how beginning music teachers compared to the developmental sequence of needs detailed by Fuller (1969).

According to Fuller (1969) in her study of beginning teachers concerns, three sequential stages of development are proposed. Johnson (1997) describes this as ‘conceptualising teaching as the progressive acquisition of stages …’ p. 817) and is further detailed in the work of researchers Feiman-Nemser (1983), Tardif (1985) and Zahorik (1986).

In the Fuller (1969) study, the data revealed that beginning teachers have (i) pre-teaching concerns and concern with self, (ii) concern with teaching and (iii) concern with pupils. Fuller & Boun (1975) describe the first level of concerns with self as being about survival, and most often demonstrated by beginning teachers. During the survival stage beginning teachers are concerned mostly about their:

- adequacy and survival as a teacher, about class control, about being liked by pupils, about supervisors’ opinions, about being observed, evaluated, praised and failed. That they were also worried ‘about having to much work with too many students or having too many instructional duties, about time pressures, about inflexible situations, lack of instructional materials, and so on. (p. 37)

Finally, the perspectives of the beginning music teacher, mentor teacher and supervisor were discussed in relation to the Concerns Confrontation Conceptualisation (CCC) (ibid.). This framework was intended to enable the beginning teacher to analyse their teaching from several perspectives. In this instance I have adopted the CCC model for clarity (Table 1).

Results and Discussion

The results provided here represent the perspectives of the beginning music teachers, mentor teachers and the researcher involved in this project. Analysis of the journals, interviews, observations and mentor teachers and researcher identified a number of concerns. These are summarised as follows:

- The **beginning music teachers** highlighted concerns about classroom management, adequate teaching materials, of failing—having bad lessons, about their mentor teacher and their expectations of them, of knowing how to teach, of becoming a teacher—displaying teacher habits.
- The **mentor teachers** had concerns regarding their student teachers’ ability to manage the class effectively, take initiative and develop concepts at appropriate ability levels and be flexible in a variety of learning contexts.
As the visiting supervisor, I observed a lack of adequate review and analysis strategies by the beginning teachers in order to address significant concerns. The inability to solve problems and issues in a calm and logical way and a tendency to panic.

Fuller and Boun’s sequence of concerns follows three sequential steps: (i) pre-teaching and concerns about self, (ii) teaching situation concerns, and (iii) concerns about pupils. The beginning music teachers did display similar features of the sequential steps. However, not all students moved from one step to the next. There were many instances of movement back and forth within the sequence.

When the students were first interviewed they had only spent 3 or 4 days observing primary school classrooms. They had attended approximately 72 hours of curriculum and other related studies. They also had their own experiences of being a student in schools for 12 years. At the initial focus meeting the beginning music teachers described their concerns. One indicated that she had ‘no idea what resources will/will not work, I don’t know enough about music styles’, another stated that ‘nothing is connected, the philosophical, the practical … too mindboggling’. Another said, ‘It is going to be lots of guessing—I’ll be rattling around, I don’t know how much I have learned?’ Some were concerned about the responsibility of different situations, classes, age requirements, roles of the teacher and the students; ‘I’m not that much older than them, will they listen to me?’ ‘I am not sure what I want to teach each class, how will I know how to act with the children, how to teach them’. A few students were excited about moving into the classroom and were keen to use the resources they had collected and they hoped for a mentor teacher that ‘understands’. They were hoping that they would develop their own style of teaching beyond the modelling of the mentor teacher.

They were particularly concerned about classroom management. They often did not seem to know how to manage the students. Many were shocked that the students did not seem to want to behave. Although there had been some discussion and observation of behaviour issues in the curriculum studies unit the students did not seem to be able to draw upon their knowledge or analyse why they were having problems and find solutions. They were expecting to learn this whilst in school.

**Linda:** In my first lesson I had no control and she (mentor teacher) had to help me. She said I don’t care what you achieve as long as you have control over the class. I watched her do it and she was amazing. My first problem was getting them to form a circle. It took all of the 35 minutes to get them to make a circle.

**Angela:** I found that …I wouldn’t get through half of what I wanted, they would put up their hands and tell stories that went on and on … I wouldn’t get them to shut up. I would be thinking, how can I tell you to be quiet in a nice way. Uh uh … I would say and nod … hands down.

Another theme that emerged and seem to add stress to the practicum were the relationships with the mentor teacher and university supervisor. Some students found they conflicted with their mentor teacher and became frustrated that they were expected to model their mentor teachers. Many wanted to try their own ideas and when directed differently by their mentor teachers, often misinterpreted their help as interference. Others were delighted with their mentor teacher’s nurturing and a few said they really ‘clicked’.
An underlying issue emerged about passing and failing and became evident in comments such as:

**Kris:** I didn’t know how to take my teacher. She would give me feedback at the end of the lesson … two or three pages worth and anything I did wrong … by the end I was overwhelmed by her negativism and I felt if it wasn’t that I really wanted to do teaching then someone else might not cope. She was contradictory … I would suggest things but in the end she decided what I should do. I wanted to put some fun into it. She was strict with the kids and they responded well. I could tolerate more noise than her … . It made me uncomfortable. If I did let them be a bit chatty in class she would say that I didn’t have them under control. I had to pass so I thought I will just do it.

**Angela:** She is older and wiser, she gave me a solid structure and I needed that. I didn’t mind it. We were different in thinking and she didn’t understand that. Everything I did had to have a reason and if I didn’t have a reason she would say it was thoughtlessness and she would say why did you do that and I would have to tell her why so she could see it. It was like a constant test all the time.

Some of the beginning teachers detailed concerns about the limitations and frustration’s of the teaching situation. They were worried about what to teach and why. This could be identified as the second sequential stage: teaching situation concerns. They were concerned about their own teaching performance rather than with student achievement. Sarah provides evidence for this as follows:

**Sarah:** I didn’t realise just how much energy I needed …. before lessons I would pace and be really worried but when they came in I had to change into this other person. You have 25 kids looking at me for direction Oh god I have to tell you all what to do… It was my enthusiasm that got them to do what you wanted to do especially with the young kids. I had to teach songs that I didn’t really enjoy … my mentor teacher said to me ‘make them enjoy it’ …that was hard for me. I had to sing it 32 times. Scarred for life!

The third stage: concerns about students, was evident in many of the journal entries. Many detailed concern for the students’ learning and their individual social and emotional needs. Some of the beginning teachers wanted to find ways of relating and connecting to the students on more personal levels. Some students were worried whether ‘what I will prepare will be relevant to my classes’. Others expressed concern about ‘what is appropriate for certain age groups and what is appropriate to teach them?’. Another student indicated that ‘confidence is the only thing lacking in my outlook, is the way I want to approach researching lessons—I don’t know where to start’. ‘Lesson plans are just a total state of confusion!!!’. There also seemed to be a high level of priority to producing correct lesson plans rather than being concerned about the learning outcomes.

**Sarah:** How do you coordinate gradually building up skills. Without using the same activity. I didn’t realise just how long it would take to teach one thing. I often got the timing wrong. I learned to expand things and find ways to get it correct. I didn’t expect to take four lessons to do something.
James: I was surprised as well just how quickly they did remember songs. They remembered the things they really liked and wanted to do those things again. Sometimes I assumed they could keep a steady beat but they couldn’t. I kept saying to this one kid play it properly but I actually never showed him how to!

Linda: Questioning techniques … I can’t question … they are always yes/no. I think I finally understand the evaluation. I am sick of the lesson plans. How much do you write? My mentor teacher made me justify everything I did.

There is scope for understanding how the beginning music teachers learn how to teach from viewing the data in relation to the three dimensions of the CCC model. Much of what was reported in the journals and in the interviews moved across all three but predominantly Dimensions 1: Internal self-evaluations and 2: Self-observations. There seemed to be little self-evaluation and responsibility for understanding significant concerns (Dimension 3) during this first practicum. Student teachers were too involved in concerns about themselves and ‘survival’. When the mentor teacher and supervisor (researcher) observed, there was often conflict in what the beginning teacher thought they were doing, and what they were observed doing. This revealed the low level of awareness that the beginning teacher had of his/her own performance. It was also clear that that there was a gap in what they thought they were achieving and what, in reality, was being achieved.

In order to provide the student teachers with some assistance in managing their concerns they were asked to maintain their journals in a structured way. The aim was that they would learn to reflect on their own practice using the CCC framework with some adaptation of the categories to ensure that they were clear about what was expected of them. Some student teachers found the writing of a journal difficult and needed to be more directed. As Campbell-Evans and Maloney (1998) noted, some need to be ‘inspired’ and some ‘instructed’ on how to be reflective and effective journal writers. The headings were derived from the Fuller and Boun (1975) and the categories designed by Campbell-Evans and Maloney intended for analysing student journals. The students were encouraged to write in their journal in the format of Table 2.

The quality of journal entries noticeably improved. Where previously the beginning teachers wrote if and whenever they felt like it, they now described and analysed consistently. They drew in the perspectives of their mentor teacher and the supervisor/researcher as appropriate, and at other times disregarded opinions. There was a significant amount of data that cannot be fully reported here. However, providing the beginning teacher with a strategy in order to describe and analyse significant events during the practicum experience was reported as being a useful tool. It gave the supervisor invaluable insight into how the beginning teacher managed their practicum when provided with a strategy for understanding events.

Conclusion

The study did not aim to provide generalisations for all beginning music teachers. In the first instance, the study explored the formative experiences that beginning music teachers have in learning how to teach, and the experiences of participants from a distinctly Western Australian perspective. Conclusions of the research are many, as is the potential for research in the area.
### Table 2. Journal guidance: Confrontation Conceptualisation (CCC) categories

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Category 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Report</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Describe the phenomena or event. Try to get the perspective of your mentor teacher of what happened. Don’t analyse at this stage. Just state the facts. What happened?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Review/analyse</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confront these concerns and ask why? Interpret what happened. Ask yourself the following questions: What did I want to achieve? Have I checked my lesson plan? Did I achieve my stated learning outcomes? What did I think I achieved? What did the mentor teacher observe me achieving? Are there any discrepancies or concerns?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reconceptualise/reconstruct</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rework your ideas based on your observations. How can this impact on future classes? What will you do differently? Why? Have you changed your perspective? Has this caused any change in how you think about education and its purpose?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A major finding of the study was that beginning music teachers do experience learning how to teach in similar stages or clusters as described by Fuller and Boun (1975). Another key finding was that there were, at times, significant discrepancies between what the teacher wanted to achieve, what they actually achieved and what they were observed achieving. Further, the added pressures of the relationship with the mentor-teacher sometimes made the experience more stressful. It is important to consider the role that mentor-teachers play in the current teacher-education programme and their impact on the development of beginning music teachers.

An unexpected consequence of the study was the relationships that developed with the researcher and the students, and students with each other, as the study progressed. A high level of trust and confidence emerged. It was evident that the concerns of beginning music teachers in this study were intensely felt. Not one beginning music teacher said that he/she was a good teacher. They were passionate as they told their stories and this in itself could be further explored as a means of stimulating both personal and professional growth. Developing their ‘voice’ (Craig, 1999; Gitlin, 1990; Jensen et al., 1997; Rust, 1999; Simon, 1987) on the ‘professional landscape’ (Clandinin, 1992). The beginning music teachers enjoyed discussing their concerns and found comfort in having their peer group identify and listen to how they felt. We consoled each other and laughed together.

An implication for the researcher was that the pre-service teacher education programme should consider the needs and concerns of beginning music-teachers more directly in order to encourage the development of self-awareness. If the hurdles of the beginning music teacher are more fully recognised and addressed this may make for less anxious students teachers as they learn how to teach.

There is opportunity for future research to explore in greater detail the change process that beginning music teachers’ experience and the impact that this has on teacher
education programmes. There is also scope to consider the way in which the discrepancies between what beginning music teachers wanted to achieve, what was achieved and what was observed to be achieved can be addressed.

Endnote

As a teacher educator this has been a reciprocal learning experience that will have effects on my own practice. I have found that to encourage a deeper level of interpretation and professional growth beginning music teachers require supported and structured experiences. A common ground between the university ‘theory’ courses and the practical experience needs to be found to have an impact on continuing professional development. Issues that arose, for instance, included the development of strategies for behaviour management and understanding the politicisation of education and schools. There also seems to be some merit in allowing beginning music teachers the opportunity to explore, in a meaningful way, their own experiences. This investigation has suggested that the practicum experience should become one that is tailored to the individual needs of the student teacher in order to maximise benefits. It will be essential that the student teachers be encouraged to become independent, critical thinkers and learners in order to meet the challenge of becoming a teacher.

As indicated earlier it will be my intention to continue providing students with the opportunity to chart their own learning and encourage their development as professional educators.

Acknowledgement

Each student teacher involved in this project contributed with honesty and integrity. I am full of respect and admiration for their courage in becoming informed educators.

NOTE

The data presented here is part of a larger research project and aspects of have been presented at the Flexible Futures in Tertiary Education Symposium, 4–8 February 2000, Curtin University, Western Australia.

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