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# "How Can I Get Better?": An Instrumental Case Study of Three Experienced Music Teachers and Their Journey to Expertise

The purpose of this study was to examine the career experiences of three music teachers through the lens of expertise theory. An additional purpose was to discover how the participants viewed success in the field of music education. Using an instrumental case study design, three experienced music teachers—who served as the case—were interviewed about these topics. Expertise theory, as well as the concept of grit, provided the theoretical framework for this project. Through a multi-level process of coding, several themes were derived from the interview transcripts. Themes included common early career struggles and perseverance through a reliance on mentors, a focus on problem solving, and adapting to new and challenging experiences. In addition, participants defined success as being student-centered at all times and maintaining program enrollment. Finally, the participants seemed to embody the last phase of expertise theory by being innovators in their field. Implications for music teacher preparation programs, pre-service music teachers, and in-service teachers are discussed.
*Keywords: expertise, grit, mentor, music teacher preparation, veteran teachers*

## Introduction

Current trends in education indicate that 40–50% of novice teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Ingersoll, 2012). Researchers have documented that music teachers face rates of attrition similar to their non-music counterparts (Hancock, 2016), and the content-specific challenges that contribute to music teacher turnover (e.g., large class sizes, instrument inventory, budgeting) are numerous and well-documented (Bell-Robertson, 2015; Conway, 2001, 2006; DeLorenzo, 1992; Gardner, 2010; Hancock, 2008; Krueger, 2000).

Although music teachers face a host of challenges that are specific to the field, there remains a large population of experienced music teachers who have acquired expertise over the course of many years. Examining how teachers develop expertise is something that can inform music teacher educators and in-service teachers about important issues regarding retention and success in music education across the span of a career. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the career experiences of three music teachers through the lens of expertise theory (Ericsson & Charness, 1994). An additional purpose was to discover how the participants viewed success in the field of music education. The following research questions guided this study: (1) How do music teachers describe the challenges they have faced throughout their careers?; (2) How do they describe overcoming those challenges?; and (3) How do expert music teachers describe success?

*Theoretical Framework*

**Expertise Theory.** The idea that expertise in a given field is not bestowed by nature—but rather, can be developed—has gained traction over the years. According to Ericsson et al. (1993), deliberate practice is the key ingredient for expertise in a given domain. Deliberate practice is defined as "a highly structured activity" wherein "specific tasks are invented to overcome weaknesses" (p. 368). Researchers have suggested that it takes roughly 10 years—or 10,000 hours—of deliberate practice to obtain expertise in a given field (Ericsson et al., 1993), with the key word being *deliberate*. Although the 10 year mark is a commonly used benchmark to designate the amount of time required to acquire expertise, time alone does not seem to guarantee expertise. In other words, "extended experience" alone does not lead to expertise, but rather extended experience combined with intense, deliberate efforts at improvement (Ericsson et al., 1993).

A large amount of practice alone does not lead to expertise in a given field. Rather, practice should be focused, detailed, and goal-oriented, and start with specific, objective outcomes (Ericsson et al., 1993). However, as Ericsson et al. noted, "deliberate practice is not inherently enjoyable" (p. 371). How then, do experts commit to such high levels of practice over so many years? The concept of grit becomes central to answering this question. Grit is simply defined as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). Researchers have shown that there is a positive relationship between higher levels of grit and teacher effectiveness (Duckworth et al., 2009) and retention (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014). These findings are not surprising given the following description of grit:

> Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina. Whereas disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, the gritty individual stays the course. (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1088)

Thus, deliberate practice and grit work in tandem, forming a cyclical loop. As each new, challenging task is presented, the gritty individual must make the decision to dig deep and push forward, or quit.

Another hallmark of expertise acquisition is a period of apprenticeship in which the individual engaging in intensive practice studies with a master teacher in their field (Bloom, 1985; Ericsson & Charness, 1994). Similarly, novice teachers who wish to excel must also seek out mentors in their field (e.g., other master teachers). In fact, many young teachers are supplied with mentors as a matter of policy within their schools/districts (Andrews et al., 2006; Benson, 2008; Ingersoll, 2012; Sorenson, 2019).

As a final component of skill acquisition, Ericsson and Charness (1994) have suggested that individuals at the highest level of achievement in their fields surpass the contributions of their mentors and master teachers. Therefore, the final stage of expertise acquisition is considered a period of innovation. In the field of music education, innovation can take many forms, including diverse concert programming (Gilmore, 1993); creative approaches to pedagogy, curriculum, and ensembles (Lebler, 2007; Niknafs, 2019; Williams, 2011); and expanded use of technology (Kuhn, 2012).

## Related Literature

A great deal of scholarship has been devoted to examining new music teacher turnover. Madsen and Hancock (2002) discovered that 17% of music teachers left the profession within the first 10 years and an additional 34% left after six subsequent years. Hancock (2016) has reported similar rates of music teacher turnover.

Many other factors contribute to music teacher stress and turnover, and these issues have been well-documented. They include heavy workloads, specifically due to added extra-curricular responsibilities (Hancock, 2008); itinerant, part-time, and/or multi-classroom positions (Conway, 2001; Gardner, 2010); handling money and maintaining program budgets (Conway, 2006; DeLorenzo, 1992; Madsen & Hancock, 2002); administrative tasks such as paperwork for festivals, bus requests, booster meetings, and equipment repairs (Conway, 2006; Kelly, 2000);

classroom management problems tied to large class sizes (Gardner, 2010; Gordon, 2002; Haack & Smith, 2000; Kelly, 2000; Krueger, 2000); pressure to maintain program enrollment (Scheib, 2003); pressure to maintain high level of public performances and festival ratings (Conway, 2001; Shaw, 2016); lack of administrative support for programs (Gardner, 2010; Krueger, 2000; Madsen & Hancock, 2002; Shaw, 2016); and isolation (Sindberg & Lipscomb, 2005).

Unfortunately, many in-service music educators leave their music teacher education programs feeling a lack of preparation for the issues listed above (Ballantyne, 2006). In an attempt to offer support to new teachers during this transitionary time, induction and mentoring programs for novice teachers have grown over the years (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Researchers have demonstrated that there seems to be a positive effect for new teachers who engage in well-designed and implemented induction programs, especially those that have strong mentorship components (Andrews & Quinn, 2005; Ingersoll, 2012; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

The experiences of new music teachers, as well as the many challenges they face, have been well documented. In addition, researchers have begun to document the experiences of music teachers in the second stage of their careers, or those who have surpassed the initial survival period (Conway & Eros, 2016; Eros, 2011, 2012, 2013; Koner & Eros, 2019). In a study on the experiences of 12 second stage music teachers, Conway and Eros (2016) found that the second stage of the music teacher's career could be described by the following themes: feeling settled, assuming leadership, uncertainty, and seeking new challenges.

There is also considerable research on teaching expertise in the general education setting, with many attempts at describing its stages and features. Berliner (2001) described several characteristics of expert teachers, including better problem solving strategies, extensive pedagogical content knowledge, more challenging objectives, better classroom climate, and the display of more passion for teaching. In *A Life-Cycle Model for Career Teachers*, Steffy et al. (2000) defined expert teachers as those who "anticipate student responses, modifying and adjusting instruction to promote growth," and "competently support, facilitate, and nurture growth and development of all students" (p. 8).

Despite the abundant research on expertise in general education settings, research on the experiences of expert music teachers specifically is sparse. More research on this topic is needed to help provide insight into how to achieve success and longevity in the field of P–12 music education. Therefore, the central aim of this study was to explore the experiences of three expert music teachers through the lens of expertise theory, with an additional purpose of discovering how those experts viewed success in the field of music education.

## Method

In order to investigate the topic of career longevity and the development of expertise in the field of P–12 music education, I used an instrumental case study design for the current study. Instrumental case studies are used in instances when researchers wish to gain "insight into [a] question by studying a particular case" (Stake, 1995, p. 3). Because the instrumental case study is designed to explore a specific issue by examining it within the context of a bounded case—and I was interested in investigating the specific issue of expertise development in P–12 music education—I chose to designate three expert P–12 music teachers as the case. The experiences of the expert teachers in the current study serve to support the understanding of larger concepts such as success and career longevity in the field of music education.

### *Defining "Expert" Teacher*

In the field of music education, researchers have recently begun to describe the experiences of second stage teachers, or those who have surpassed the initial survival period (Conway & Eros, 2016; Eros, 2011, 2012, 2013; Koner & Eros, 2019). In an examination of teachers who have moved beyond the second stage, Conway (2008) described experienced music teachers' perceptions of professional development throughout their careers. In this study, Conway used *The Life Cycle of the Career Teacher* (Steffy et al., 2000) as a model to define the career stages of her participants. In addition, Conway described her participants as being either mid-career (5–11 years) or veteran (16 or more years). Similarly, researchers in the field of expertise acquisition have suggested it takes around ten years of sustained deliberate practice to become an expert in a given field (Ericsson et al., 1993; Ericsson & Charness, 1994).

### *Participants*

Using Conway's (2008) designations for career stages, *The Life Cycle of the Career Teacher* (Steffy et al., 2000), and Ericsson and Charness's (1994) model of expertise acquisition as a guide, I developed a criterion-based sampling method to select participants for the current study (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). I used the following criteria to select participants: (1) ten or more years of teaching experience; (2) evidence of professional expertise (e.g., large program enrollment, successful ratings at performance assessments, serving as cooperating teacher for student teachers); and (3) a variety of teaching specializations (e.g., band, choir, elementary/general, orchestra).

Because of my own experience working as a music teacher, I was able to draw upon previously existing relationships to identify teachers from the school district in which I taught who might fit within the parameters of this study. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, I identified and emailed five potential participants using email addresses that were obtained through the school district website. The initial email explained the purpose of the study and provided information regarding the voluntary, confidential nature of participation. Three teachers agreed to participate in the study—Jordan, Jackie, and Kathy. (Having worked in the same district as the participants, I was professionally acquainted with all three and had a personal relationship with two.) Using the career stage designations from Conway's (2008) study, participants for the current study were considered mid-career (Jordan) and veteran (Jackie and Kathy) teachers. All participant names, schools, and school districts are pseudonyms. Participant profiles can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1**
*Participant Profiles*

| Pseudonym | Years of Teaching Experience | Current Teaching Position | Past Teaching Experience | Degrees Obtained |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jordan | 10 | Middle school band | Middle school band and choir | Bachelor of Music Education |
| Jackie | 24 | High school choir and musical theater | Elementary/general, middle school choir, high school keyboard | Bachelor of Music Education and Master of Music in Choral Conducting |
| Kathy | 32 | Elementary/general music | Middle school band and choir, high school band and choir | Bachelor of Music Education and Master of Arts in Educational Leadership |

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Each teacher participated in one 45 to 55 minute interview (Jordan–53:55; Jackie–45:40; Kathy–46:15). Because of the idiosyncratic and contextual nature of the information relevant to the study, I used a semi-structured interview format because "it allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111). All interviews were conducted and recorded through the Zoom (Version 5.3.1) video conferencing platform.

In the interviews, I sought to investigate some of the early career challenges faced by the participants and how they overcame those challenges (e.g., "Think back to your first few years teaching and talk about some of the challenges you faced during this time" and "What are some things that have helped you overcome these challenges over the years?"). In addition, I asked participants about the role mentors played in their early careers, as well as what it means to have a successful program (e.g., "Tell me about the mentors you have encountered over the years, and more specifically, how they offered you support throughout your career" and "What are some markers of success for a music program?"). Interview transcripts from those interviews and a researcher journal that I maintained throughout the process served as the primary data sources for this project.

After creating transcripts from the interviews, I engaged in three rounds of coding. My approach to generating codes and condensing them into broader themes was guided by Creswell's (2015) suggestions regarding the coding process—a short list of codes is developed at the beginning of the process, followed by an expansion to no more than 30 categories before being collapsed into a final group of 4-6 themes. The first round of coding was deductive in nature, as I had developed certain codes a priori (Elliott, 2018) based on the study's theoretical underpinnings (i.e., deliberate practice, mentoring, and defining success). For this round, I read through the participants' transcripts and identified content that fit within a set of "pre-determined list of codes" based on a "theory/prediction about what [would] be found in the data before they have been collected" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 123). In the second round, I employed an inductive coding method, wherein I allowed emergent themes to help guide the construction of additional codes. Because many of the participants' own words helped to form the codes, I used an in vivo approach in this round (Saldaña, 2009). In the final round of coding, I employed thematic analysis to condense and subsume the codes from the previous rounds into four basic categories (Boyatzis, 1998), which I then summarized into the following themes: becoming an expert, grit, defining success, and innovation.

### *Subjectivities & Trustworthiness*

I brought certain subjectivities to the current study that had the potential to shape the collection and interpretation of the data. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) have noted, "it is important to identify [subjectivities] and monitor them in relation to the theoretical framework and in light of the researcher's own interest" (p. 16). Because I had previously worked in the same school district as the three participants and had personal relationships with two of them, I had a deeper understanding of the contexts in which they taught. In addition, my own experience as a

music teacher with first-hand knowledge of the challenges faced by novice teachers helped to guide the construction of interview questions. However, it was also important that I monitored my own biases when constructing the interview protocol and collecting data. In order to accomplish this, I selected a semi-structured interview format so as to allow participants to help guide discussion, intentionally left certain interview questions open-ended to encourage individual interpretation and not "lead the question" based on my own biases, and consistently asked participants to clarify their responses for accuracy and authenticity.

Although the personal assumptions I brought to the current study provided me with an enhanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, it was important to monitor them in order to maintain a level of reflexivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition to monitoring my subjectivities, I relied heavily on the theoretical frameworks of expertise acquisition (Ericsson et al., 1993; Ericsson & Charness, 1994) and grit (Duckworth et al., 2007) to frame the research questions and guide the construction of interview questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also maintained a research journal throughout the research process in which I kept detailed records, including interview notes, development of themes, preliminary interpretations, and reflections about my potential biases. According to Watt (2007), "through journal writing, researchers may be able to better determine what they know and how they think they came to know it" (p. 84).

Additionally, I used peer examination and member checking to establish trustworthiness. The peer examination process involved having a doctoral student in the field of music education review a portion of the raw data and subsequent interpretations for plausibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through the process of member checking, I provided each participant a copy of their interview transcript as well as the resulting researcher interpretations and allowed them to analyze them to see if it all "rings true" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). Two of the three participants provided small clarifications to their own wordings and/or provided additional information that they believed would supplement the data that I collected through the interviews.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Becoming an Expert*

**Expectation vs. Reality.** For two of the participants, the realities of their first job did not match the expectations created during the student teaching experience. Both Jordan and Jackie found themselves teaching in settings that were dif-

ferent than their internships, and this dissonance created tension during their first year teaching. As Jordan noted,

> *I thought I was going to do high school, so when I ended up in a middle school classroom... my flaws and inability and lack of preparedness came back to bite me quickly and it was a hot and heavy sweat through those classes.*

Similarly, Jackie remarked, "I did my internship at Bay Elementary . . . In July, I got a call from Oak Tree High School . . . so I was fortunate to have a job, number one. But now, *high school*?"

Participants also found that there were knowledge gaps they needed to fill during the early stages of their careers. When asked if there were certain aspects of teaching that their undergraduate degree did not prepare them for, all of the participants cited issues related to non-instructional, administrative tasks. This list included items such as student assessment, how to get purchase orders and copies, and generally "how the school worked." In response to this question, Kathy answered candidly, "They don't teach us those minute paperwork things that are very specific to each district."

**Deliberate Practice.** The primary tenet of Ericsson's expertise theory involves extended, deliberate practice as a necessity for expert skill acquisition. In order to overcome the obstacles they encountered during the early stages of their careers, the participants made concerted efforts to further develop the skills needed to become better teachers. These efforts included seeking assistance from mentors. According to Ericsson and Charness (1994), "To attain exceptional levels of performance, subjects must in addition undergo a very long period of active learning, during which they refine and improve their skill, ideally under the supervision of a teacher or coach" (p. 12). All three participants discussed a reliance on mentors during the early stages of their careers. For instance, with regard to his early career mentors, Jordan remarked, "I called them every day to ask questions and when I wouldn't call them, they started to call me because they were worried." According to Jackie, if it had not been for the help of her mentor, "it [first year teaching] would have been very daunting."

In addition to reaching out to mentors, the participants sought to improve their practice by identifying problems and finding creative solutions. With regard to the idea of creative problem solving, Jordan remarked, "I just kind of got addicted to it, like a video game where I come up with different maps, different scenarios, different struggles throughout the classroom and come up with cool ways to try and fix them."

**Discussion.** As Ericsson et al. (1993) have shown, expertise is developed through approximately ten years of sustained, deliberate practice. In the field of education, which typically requires approximately four years of formal preparation, one might understand how a novice teacher still has several years ahead of them to approach a certain level of expertise. The participants in the current study corroborated this notion, describing their early years of teaching as periods of continued growth and understanding of the profession.

By taking jobs in programs that were different than their student teaching situations, both Jordan and Jackie were put into positions that added to the number of challenges they faced as novice teachers. Although both were nervous about the prospect of teaching outside their specialization, they faced the challenges head on. In addition, participants' lack of preparation for school-based and administrative tasks echoes findings from prior research which suggests that novice music teachers often struggle to navigate non-instructional, organizational tasks (Conway, 2006).

The fact that all three participants relied on mentors for support in the early years of their careers also supports Ericsson and Charness's (1994) theory regarding the acquisition of expertise. In addition to relying on mentors, the participants strengthened their practice and moved beyond challenges by focusing on problem solving, which is a hallmark characteristic of expert teachers (Berliner, 2004). Whereas many inexperienced teachers might see problems as reasons to give up, these experts viewed problems as opportunities for growth. This approach to problem solving allowed them to not only survive, but thrive.

### *Grit*

**Perseverance.** The veteran teachers in this study were not immune to what Duckworth and colleagues referred to as "plateaus in progress" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1088). Duckworth's description of "plateaus in progress" implies that an individual's progress is not always a steady, linear climb. In fact, Jackie and Kathy showed that challenges can appear at any stage in one's career and it takes perseverance and creativity to stay the course.

Although Kathy had spent many years as an elementary teacher at the time of her interview, she began her career as a band director. After spending several years building a successful middle school band program, Kathy became a mother and found that she could not sustain the same level of professional commitment as in years past while maintaining a healthy work-life balance. When faced with an "ultimatum" from her husband regarding her work-life balance and seeing little of her young daughter due to long hours at work, she recalled, "I had to think

long and hard about how I could solve that . . . I knew I couldn't be *less* of a band director." This challenge Kathy faced as a young band director and mother forced her to come to terms with her chosen career path. However, rather than quit the profession, Kathy ultimately made the decision to move from middle school band to elementary general music, a move she has found to be very rewarding.

Jackie, too, found herself at a crossroads twenty years into her career. After having completed a master's degree in choral conducting, she decided to make the switch from the elementary classroom to high school chorus. As Jackie recounts, the transition was difficult:

> *My first year at Saddlebrook [High School], where I am now, was heck on roller skates! The second year was not much better . . . I told the principal, "I just, I can't. I don't want to come back next year . . . It was not a pleasant experience overall.*

When asked how and why she decided to persevere, she stated,

> *I felt if I didn't give it the normal three or four years to get through this that I would just go back to elementary. And feel like I had just given up . . . I didn't want to give up. I didn't want to give up for the kids or the program.*

**Adaptability/Flexibility.** According to the participants, adaptability and perseverance have gone hand in hand throughout their careers. As Jordan put it, "If you want to survive in the industry long enough, you adapt." Jackie cited the need to remain flexible when it comes to lesson planning when she said "maybe your plans that you have for that day, for whatever reason, you can't go through those plans and you need to change it. Do something else." For Kathy, the ability to adapt was an absolute necessity when she had to make the transition to elementary teaching. In order to make a successful switch, she attained additional training and certification, including Orff Schulwerk certification.

**Discussion.** Gritty people tend to maintain longevity in a given pursuit, despite the challenges faced along the way. According to Duckworth et al. (2007), "Grit entails maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina" (pp. 1087–1088). The teachers in this study exemplified this idea, showing that although deliberate practice is the path to expertise, that path is not always linear.

A plateau in progress suggests that upward growth and achievement have halted. Both Kathy and Jackie spent several years steadily gaining success as

teachers, only to find that mid-career changes halted their upward growth for a time. However, rather than giving up, both women dug deep and persevered. In fact, these teachers' experiences exemplify Conway and Eros's (2016) suggestion that music teachers in the second stage of their careers may experience uncertainty and/or seek new challenges. It is also worth mentioning that Kathy's attempts at balancing family and career also highlight gender-specific issues related to women in music education. Although beyond the scope of the current study, these issues certainly have implications for career longevity for female music educators.

In addition to a commitment to persevere in the face of challenges, the participants retained a sense of flexibility. Rigid inflexibility in the face of obstacles will only force the individual to break. These experts chose to bend.

### *Defining Success*

**A Student-Centered Approach.** For the teachers in this study, success was always defined in terms of the students. According to Jordan, "If your kids come in and are looking forward to your class, that is one very strong indicator of a successful program." For Jackie in particular, providing a safe and positive environment for her students was an important marker of success for her program. She stressed that although music is the medium through which she works with students, the most important aspect of teaching is that,

> *They [students] can find their place. And it happens to be music. You know, it doesn't have to be. I just want every student to find something they're good at . . . I just hope that they're happy and that they're doing their best wherever they are.*

In addition, the teachers in this study emphasized the need to set high standards for their students. In other words, it is the responsibility of the teacher to set the bar high, and when they did, "the students really appreciate[d] that." According to these expert teachers, when the bar is set high, the students will rise to the occasion and achieve success. Jordan describes how he knows he has achieved success in his program:

> *Now granted, our sheets [at music performance assessment] got straight A's . . . But the kids hated their recording and for me that was just a really cool moment because their standards were higher than even I expected them to be . . . That's one of the fun moments, is when your kids become artists. They become self-starters. They have that sense of discrepancy. They know what's good . . . And once they become little independent musicians, that's when I can go ahead and pat myself on the back and say, "alright, yeah these kids are getting it."*

**Prolonged Student Involvement in Music.** Another characteristic of success for the participants was prolonged student engagement in music. For Jordan, this meant seeing his students continue on in band from middle school to high school. Jackie—who transitioned from teaching elementary music to high school choir in the same district—mentioned how "special" it was to see former students continue in their various musical pursuits as high schoolers. Kathy even had former elementary students go on to study music education and specifically request to student teach in her program. Reflecting on this event, Kathy remarked, "Okay, I must have done something that inspired them, or made them want to do that."

**Discussion.** Music teachers today are under a great deal of stress to create high-performing music programs and do well at festivals and competitions because doing so is an indication of their perceived effectiveness as teachers (Shaw, 2016). However, doing well at festivals and competitions is not the only measure of success for music educators. In order to discover the participants' perceptions regarding what defines success, I asked them to describe their idea of success for a music teacher and music program. Notions of success for these expert teachers included maintaining a student-centered approach and creating student musicians who maintain involvement in music programs for many years.

Although the participants were asked to discuss their own experiences and opinions regarding teaching and success, they were often eager to shift the focus to their students. As discussed, music teachers must navigate many professional challenges; however, the expert teachers in the current study appeared to maintain a positive outlook by focusing on the progress and well-being of their students above all else. Jordan and Jackie were particularly focused on creating a positive classroom climate for their students, which is a hallmark of teaching expertise (Berliner, 2001).

In addition, the teachers maintained high expectations for their students. Jordan, in particular, felt a high level of professional success when his students exhibited mature musical discrimination. Furthermore, all three participants noted feeling like successful teachers when their students exhibited prolonged involvement in school music programs. As Williams (2011) has noted, the majority of secondary students are not involved in school music offerings. These expert music teachers, however, understand the significance of retention.

### *Innovation*

**Ensemble Accomplishments.** Musical opportunities that go above and beyond the status quo have been created by the participants in this study. For Jackie, this recently manifested in an invitation for her choir to perform at Carnegie Hall,

an experience for which she was humbled and "amazed." For Kathy, innovation meant expanding the ensemble offerings for her elementary students. In addition to typical elementary ensembles such as chorus and Orff, she remarked, "I have stomp percussion ensemble at both schools, which is an original thing."

**Becoming a Mentor.** Just as the process of expertise acquisition begins with mentorship, so it ends. Two of the teachers in this study have demonstrated innovation by becoming mentors to the next generation of young music educators. Both Jordan and Kathy have become supervisors for student teachers and find great value in this role. When asked what events in his career have proven to be the most meaningful, Jordan responded, "I enjoy having interns . . . I also like giving them an opportunity to be in a classroom that they're not battling classroom management things...so my interns actually get to focus on how to teach things."

Kathy, in particular, expressed a strong sense of responsibility to help the young teachers in her district. As she noted,

> *I work really hard to make myself available and answer those questions for them [new teachers]. I think that's important. They've got to have somebody who's not going to look down on them or give them grief because they don't know how to do that. They have to have somebody who says, "let me show you how to do this."*

In addition to offering herself as a sounding board for new teachers, Kathy has designed and implemented training for the new teachers in her district for the county's teacher evaluation system. Through this service, she provides new teachers with guidance for an aspect of the profession which she feels is particularly challenging for new teachers. Jordan, too, contributes to music education at a higher level in his school and district by serving as coordinator for many countywide music events. In addition, he was recently selected as one of the top five teachers of the year in his entire district, which has brought added recognition to his music program.

**Discussion.** According to Ericsson et al. (1993), "The criteria for eminent performance goes beyond expert mastery of available knowledge and skills and requires an important and innovative contribution to the domain" (p. 370). In the field of P–12 music education, innovation can take different forms. For the participants in this study, innovation has taken the form of exemplary accomplishments with their ensembles, expanding curricular opportunities for students, serving as mentors to the next generation of music educators, and taking active leadership roles in district activities.

Jackie's recent invitation to perform at Carnegie Hall and Kathy's development of unique curricular opportunities has allowed both teachers—and their students—to "venture into some unknown territory" (Williams, 2011, p. 54). In addition, Kathy and Jordan make significant contributions to the field of music education by serving as mentors and coordinating teachers for student teachers. According to Steffy and Wolfe (2001), teachers in the distinguished phase of the life-cycle model for career teachers not only make significant contributions within their own classrooms, but "impact education-related decisions at city, state, and national levels" as well (p. 17). These experts contributions—both within the classroom and beyond—clearly distinguish them as innovators.

## Conclusion

### *Implications*

Although the current findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of experienced music teachers, they can be used to inform on issues relating to music teacher success and expertise. In addition, the current study contributes to a greater understanding of experienced P–12 music teachers, an area that is lacking in music education research. Furthermore, the findings have implications for music teacher preparation, pre-service music educators, and in-service music educators.

The fact that there was a disconnect between the student teaching experience and first teaching job for all participants has implications specifically for music teacher preparation programs. As research has indicated, the student teaching experience is the "capstone" to the music education degree (Draves, 2013) and should therefore provide interns with the most comprehensive and salient experiences possible. An examination of the current participants' experiences suggests that it is not uncommon for first year music teachers to take jobs in settings that are different from their student teaching experience. Therefore, more music teacher preparation programs might consider expanding opportunities within the student teaching experience. In addition, music teacher preparation programs should seek to orient students to the procedural and practical realities of teaching in the schools (Conway, 2012).

All three teachers in the current study relied on or interacted with mentors to some capacity in the early stages of their careers. Their dependence on mentors as novice teachers further undergirds research that indicates that mentors are important for the support of young teachers (Andrews & Quinn, 2005; Ingersoll, 2012; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). In cases where mentors are not provided by schools or

school districts, in-service music teachers should therefore strive to seek out the assistance of mentors to help them tackle early career challenges.

Finally, it should be noted that none of the participants stayed in their first teaching job for an extended amount of time. When asked whether the move to their second teaching position was a positive one, they all agreed that it was. This finding aligns with results from a study in which Hancock (2016) found that "transferring music teachers experienced numerous improvements to their professional careers" (p. 421). Therefore, findings from the current study suggest that transferring schools may be a common experience for novice teachers and one that appears to positively affect overall satisfaction.

## Future Research

In the future, researchers should continue to explore the career experiences of veteran and expert teachers. The small sample and qualitative nature of this study limits the generalizability of the findings. However, data collected from the current study could be used to shape future descriptive studies of veteran music teachers, the challenges they have faced, and their perceptions of career longevity. Researchers should also continue to examine the effect of discipline-specific mentoring for novice music teachers. Life as a novice music teacher can be isolating and challenging, but others in the profession have a responsibility to help make it less so. If turnover rates for novice teachers are expected to decrease, there must be continued efforts to examine the supports that are provided to pre-service and novice music educators. Continued examination of the experiences of successful, veteran music teachers can help shape how we accomplish this.

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