

# Pre-service teacher beliefs: are musicians different?

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## Abstract

This paper reviews issues around teacher education and the beliefs students bring to their courses. It considers concerns about current classroom music teaching, preservice teachers' beliefs, and preservice music teachers' identity construction as the foundation for research currently being conducted at The University of Melbourne. The study is focussing on assessing preservice teacher beliefs when they enter their course, whether these beliefs change over the course of a year and if the music cohort is different from their peers.

**Key words:** teacher education, teacher beliefs

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## Introduction

There has been long term concern about persistent and widespread levels of student dissatisfaction and disengagement in music classes across the globe, as well as numerous calls for schools to adopt a broader and more inclusive pedagogy (DEST, 2005; Green, 2001; Kwami, 2001; Paynter, 1982; Ross, 1995; Swanwick, 1999). For example, based on information supplied by the Western Australian Department of Education and Training School of Instrumental Music, the National Review of School Music Education (DEST, 2005) found that more than 5000 instrumental music students were starting music in the middle years but by the end of Year 12 there were approximately only 300 students enrolled in classroom music. With information from other states, the researchers concluded that this level of attrition was almost certainly matched nation-wide. The question posed was "where have the music students gone?" (DEST, 2005, p. 52). There were a number of factors identified as contributing to the problem, one of which was "the differing views within the music education profession

itself as to what constitutes an appropriate music education" (DEST, 2005, p. 107). Beliefs about what must be taught and learnt in music varied widely and that while some programs met the needs of their students well, others lacked relevance for students. It was suggested that a focus on a narrow range of genres and styles is not appropriate for all students and that a diversity of approaches to music education is necessary to engage a wider range of students. In conclusion, the report declared "a coherent approach to music in schools built on foundations of diversity, access, equity, participation and engagement is a necessary reform if music is to thrive" (DEST, 2005, p. 107). It also suggested that with a stronger emphasis on these principles in preservice music teacher education programs, future music teachers might better "meet the needs of contemporary students" (DEST, 2005, p. 114).

This conclusion is echoed elsewhere. Well over a decade ago, Drummond (1997) concluded after a five-year study of the work of music teachers in Northern Ireland that music had "lost its wider

relevance beyond the classroom, and was failing to motivate some pupils within the classroom" (p. 28). Similarly, Ross (1998) and others (Kwami, 2001; Morton, 2000; Paynter, 1982; Small, 1999; Swanwick, 1999) suggested it was time for music teachers to reassess some conservative, teacher/content driven practices and programs in order to meet the needs of contemporary students; to better recognise and include students own musical cultures and interests and to ensure that practical and creative music making activities were placed at the heart of inclusive and diverse music education programs. It has also been suggested that music classes needed to accommodate informal learning and aspects of negotiated curriculum alongside formal practices (Burnard et al., 2008; Folkestad, 2005; Green, 2008). In doing so, music teachers would be better placed to facilitate peer-to-peer, differentiated and personalized learning. In summary, many music educators need to re-examine their educational objectives, lesson content, and teaching and assessment strategies, and focus on more student-centered pedagogies.

### **Preservice Music Teachers**

Clearly it can be presumed that preservice education has a significant part to play in the preparation of musicians to become classroom music teachers. It might also be assumed that student-centred pedagogy, as well as the many other suggestions from the research about improving engagement in music in the classroom could be addressed and embraced within this preservice education. Our experience indicates that this is not as easy as it might appear. We have observed that many of these students enter teacher education with well-established beliefs about teaching and learning, a notion well supported in preservice education research. What has emerged for us is that many of these beliefs appear to be very conservative; resistant to change and in stark contrast to the last 40 years of research about what is best practice in the

music classroom. Our experience with preservice teachers across disciplines has made us aware that many music students (not all) seem to have more entrenched beliefs and exhibit greater resistance to modifying their beliefs than the wider cohort. We can speculate about why this might be so. Most preservice music teachers have undergone years of instrumental training through individual or very small group studio lessons. A large number are well-established performing musicians and the majority of our cohort have a teaching studio practice. Some see music education as being primarily about learning an instrument, which in turn is often seen as being essentially a technical procedure involving the systematic mastery of a set of skills. It is not surprising that many of them place a strong emphasis on the importance of notational literacy from the earliest stage and see the music classroom as the place to teach this 'theory' to children. The irony is that the majority of their students in compulsory music classes are not likely to learn an instrument; at least not at school and not in the traditional studio sense. What many of these preservice music teachers find difficult to do is to conceive of a more inclusive music pedagogy that is outside their own direct experience.

### **Preservice teachers' beliefs**

Over the last two decades pre-service teacher beliefs have been the subject of attention by educational researchers and have been widely discussed in research literature (Fang, 1996; Isikoglu, Basturk, & Karaca, 2009; Kagan, 1992; Mansour, 2009; Nespor, 1987; Raths, 2003). Teacher attitudes and beliefs are important considerations in understanding classroom practices and conducting teacher education designed to help pre-service and in-service teachers develop their thinking and practices. The resistant-to-change nature of educational beliefs is a recurring theme (Brown & Cooney, 1982; Buchmann & Schwille, 1983; Lasley, 1980; O'Loughlin & Campbell, 1988; Pajares, 1992; Wilson, 1990).

Thompson (2007) draws some interesting connections between best pedagogical practice, music education and the beliefs of preservice music teachers. She, like many other researchers, suggests that preservice teachers enter programs with definite beliefs about teaching, students, learning, and subject matter. These beliefs are often “highly idealistic, loosely formulated, deeply seated, and traditional”, and are often considered to be simplistic or incomplete. She notes that preservice music teachers often refer to teaching as passing on knowledge and sharing their passion for music (p. 32). She suggests that the formal knowledge these students gained in schools or in private or studio music instruction creates belief structures about music and musical experiences. The instructional pedagogies that provided these students with the feelings of success are often assumed to be the ‘best way to teach all students’. Beliefs about pedagogical content knowledge that preservice music teachers have formed may actually block the learning experiences of their future students. The assumption that “I learned this way, this is what works”, leads to replication of past practice rather than exploration of new possibilities (p. 32). According to Thompson preservice teachers who experience very traditional performance-based high school program may reject the constructivist, student-centred pedagogical approaches suggested in the introduction. Thompson, like many others, recognises because students enter preservice teacher education programs having experienced up to thirteen years in classrooms, they bring beliefs that are an amalgamation of their experiences as students, and a confidence in their understanding of the role of music educator. She also raises some pertinent questions. How can music teacher education shift entrenched notions of teacher as transmitters to teachers as collaborators or teachers as co-learners if this thought to be more educationally appropriate? What must we do differently in music teacher education to ensure this outcome? If we want to break the pattern of new teachers teaching as they

were taught rather than exploring new pedagogies, what experiences can we provide in their teacher education programs to challenge this cycle? (p. 30).

For Thompson educational theories and philosophies may provide for engaging discussions, but unless these ideas are placed in the context of the preservice teacher’s beliefs and view of self-as-teacher, the teacher candidate will most likely accept these theories only if they affirm or support existing belief structures. Wiggins and Wiggins (2008), in a North American study of primary music education and music teachers, reported a range of instructive observations in regard to the pedagogical practices adopted by specialist music teachers and primary generalists teaching music. They observed that the manner and approach of many primary generalists would change appreciably during music activities, at which point they would become more severe, less democratic and often adopt “the stern air of a ‘prima donna’ music teacher” (p. 14). Observing a rehearsal for a performance, they report teachers who “completely change their demeanor with the children, drilling them in discrete activities, chastising those who made mistakes” (p. 14). According to one university music educator interviewed, teachers may see visual art and interpreting poetry as open-ended, but not music; music is either right or wrong.

Wiggins and Wiggins also describe an unjustified traditional emphasis on notational literacy, taught out of any genuinely musical ‘context’ which can be restrictive of children’s creative process. An interesting observation, again by a University instructor, was that some music teachers undervalued what indigenous children were able to do by ear, thinking they are not good at music because they cannot read notation. Advocating a constructive conception of learning and teaching, Wiggins and Wiggins suggest it is critical that the education of music teachers offer experiences that enable their students to construct understandings of music, of learning and teaching, and of music learning and teaching, ensuring that prospective teachers will act with intention and not

just out of a habit born of their own experiences as learners. Preservice music teacher and identity construction.

A large body of research has identified that there are powerful links between how preservice music teachers and in service teachers define their identity and their pedagogical beliefs and teaching practice (Bouji, 1998; Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003; Roberts, 1998; Woodford, 2002). Indeed, studies of preservice music teacher identity construction have provided important insights into understanding the nature and foundations of their beliefs.

Woodford and others define identity as “the imaginative view or role that individuals project for themselves in particular social positions, occupations, or situations” but which is dependent on others for verification and reinforcement (Woodford, 2002, p. 675). Since the early 1990s, Roberts (1991) has looked at the social construction of professional identity of preservice music education students. Among his findings was an unofficial hierarchy existing in many undergraduate music programs where performance majors seems to be at the top and often music education students somewhere near the bottom. In general, undergraduate music education students are most often rewarded for their performance abilities, not their potential as teachers.

A UK analysis of the qualifications of 74 secondary music teaching students, as an example, showed that the overwhelming majority had Advanced Level in Music, Associated Boards grade 8 instrumental or vocal qualifications, and an undergraduate music degree; very few were from non-standard backgrounds involving pop or jazz (Hargreaves, Welch, Purves, & Marshall, 2003). As Hargreaves et al. (2007) point out this places great emphasis on the ‘vocational’ model, which has a strong emphasis on high standards of professional performance, and is based largely in conservatories and university music departments. It is perhaps not surprising then that much research has found that while preservice music teachers’ identity as musicians is strong, their teacher identity is not

well developed, if at all. For these students, their *musician* self conflicts with their *teacher* self and some find the two identities very hard to reconcile (Bouji, 1998; Roberts, 1991; Woodford, 2002). For this reason many preservice music teachers find the transition to teaching very difficult.

### **Teacher education and learning to teach**

Beliefs are thought to have two functions in learning to teach. The first relates to the constructivist theories of learning that suggest that students bring beliefs to a teacher education program that strongly influence what and how they learn. The second function relates to beliefs as a focus of change in the process of education. Most students enter their academic disciplines in Universities and Colleges such as the Science, Law or even the Arts, unlikely to have well-developed theories and preconceptions about their field of study (Pajares, 1992). Medical students, for example, must enter operating theaters and emergency rooms; law students encounter courtrooms and law offices. These places are largely new to students and new understandings must be constructed. They must “define” their new surroundings and recreate their world. According to Pajares however, pre-service teachers are ‘insiders’ from the outset, and perhaps, preservice music teachers even more so. For insiders, changing conceptions is demanding and potentially threatening and it does not occur to most pre-service teachers, for example, that one of their future functions might be as agents for societal change (Edmundson, 1990). Students often become teachers unable, and subconsciously unwilling, to affect a system in need of reform. For Richardson (1996), except for the student-teaching practicum element, “preservice teacher education seems a weak intervention. It is sandwiched between two powerful forces – previous life history, particularly that related to being a student, and classroom experience as a student teacher and teacher” (p. 113). Experiences with formal

pedagogical knowledge are seen as the least powerful factor affecting beliefs and conceptions of teaching and the teacher role.

## Conclusion

This paper is but a snapshot of a much broader review of research that highlights one of the most compelling issues in music education. Calls for improving music education in the classroom have been ongoing for decades and clearly teacher education should have a significant part to play in preparing teachers with a more inclusive pedagogy. Teacher education is constantly being reshaped and reconstructed in an effort to produce “better” teachers but do they change the entrenched beliefs referred to above? Do these prospective teachers enter their preservice course with the level of conservative beliefs proposed in the research, especially the music students? Do these beliefs develop and change over their course? Are music teacher candidates different from the broader cohort? These questions have formed the basis of a study currently being conducted at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education that is investigating whether the student beliefs change over the course of a year in the Master of Teaching with a particular focus on comparing music students with the general cohort.

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