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# Mentoring, Reflective Practice and Differentiated Professional Development Supporting Classroom Music Teachers in Contemporary and Diverse Teaching Contexts

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## Introduction

In 2008, the Queensland College of Teachers released the *Professional Standards for Queensland Teachers* – a guideline document outlining the set of ten interrelated '... capabilities that teachers must possess in order to provide high quality instruction and support improved student learning' (QCT, 2007, p.4). The identified capabilities are clustered around three key areas of integrated teaching practice – teaching and learning, professional relationships, and professional growth. Standard Ten acknowledges that 'Teachers are **reflective practitioners** who establish professional learning goals, actively pursue opportunities for individual and collegial professional renewal and meet the legal and ethical obligations of the profession' (QCT, 2007, p.18).

## Professional learning communities supporting differentiated professional development

This acknowledges that reflective practice underpins teacher efficacy and growth, and that a cohesive, open and supportive professional school-based learning community, together with individual commitment to reflection, serve as strong foundations for professional development and renewal.

In Queensland, research by Lingard and others supports this. In a longitudinal study about effective teaching practice, it was identified that schools which nurture productive practice have '... significant discussion about teaching and learning, both students' and teachers' work' (Lingard et al, 2003, p.43).

School-based or 'in-house' professional development (PD) is understood to be a powerful way to meet the unique needs of a particular school staff and can be used to support collaborative critical reflection. In an Australian study, Owen (2005) found that providing flexible professional development opportunities in the school environment facilitated professionalism and productive teacher learning practices. The results found that teachers learn well *together* and that '... effective PD is planned and connected to school and individual goals; takes place over a longer timeframe, with the opportunity for follow-up; focusses on collegiality and practical activities related to the classroom; and values internal and external expertise' (Owen, 2005, p.104).

Research in New Jersey by Tienken and Stonaker (2007) highlighted that just as effective teachers engage in differentiated instruction to meet better the diverse needs of the students that they teach, there is a need for regular 'job-embedded' and **differentiated** professional development for teachers themselves. This could take a variety of forms; however, the responses to an initial survey stated that 'eighty-eight percent of the staff wanted to work in small, job-embedded learning teams on content-specific topics related to their classrooms' (Tienken & Stonaker, 2007, p.24).

The Australian study by Owen (2005) also highlighted the value of 'clustering' or creating 'hubs' of like-minded professional learners, and this was particularly important for geographically isolated teachers. 'It was important for area school teachers, faced with the issue of isolation, to place their work in relation to other teachers' (Owen 2005, p.120).

Specialist music teachers commonly experience professional isolation. For the music teacher, seeking 'external expertise' and working with a group of peers outside the immediate school environment is key to accessing discipline-specific PD, and the opportunity to engage in reflective practice via substantive conversations with like-minded colleagues. This is where the professional organisations such as ASME do much to connect teachers and support discipline-specific PD, while also providing a forum for collaborative reflection.

## Teacher Mentor – contributing to the culture of reflective practice

There is much literature to support the use of *mentoring* as a means of reflective practice, collegial support and professional growth. Pairing a more experienced or expert teacher with a novice teacher is a common approach to help induct early career teachers. *Peer mentoring* of colleagues also provides effective opportunity for professional growth.

In the case of mentor-novice relationships, problems can arise. For example, '...the assignment of mentors is typically based on convenience, volunteerism, and entitlement, rather than on selection of mentors who are willing to help novices continue learning to teach' (Stanulis & Floden, 2009, p.114).

Often, experienced teachers who themselves have not been part of a culture of reflection, sharing and collegial support in terms of teaching practice, are asked to mentor novice teachers. Although mentors may help novice teachers make situational adjustments to teaching and may reduce the drop-out rate among first-year teachers, the presence of mentors does not in and of itself guarantee that teachers will become more skilled at teaching or more thoughtful about their work than they would be without the mentors (Gratch 1998).

Teachers who offer their services in this way can end up being a 'buddy' or advisor for the induction process, but may not be skilled in facilitating deeper reflection and development of educational practices in the beginning teacher (Stanulis & Floden, 2009): 'Teachers who are good at teaching children may not be effective in teaching teachers' (Gratch 1998).

However, Stanulis and Floden believe that '...through careful preparation and support, mentors themselves can learn to have instructional conversations with novices that include understanding subject matter, planning instruction, student engagement, and formative assessment' (2009, p.114). If educators hope to contribute to the development of reflective practitioners, they must become adept at such reflection on their own teaching practice. That is, they must be trained and skilled in reflective and mentoring practices. 'The presence of a mentor alone is not enough; the mentor's knowledge and skills in how to mentor are also crucial' (Everston & Smithey 2000, p.294).

Successful mentoring can actualise symbiotic and reciprocal relationships. Mentoring, when utilised successfully, promotes professional dialogue and reflection for *both* the mentor and the teacher who is being mentored (Gratch 1998; Stanulis & Floden, 2009). Reflective examination of teaching practice can deepen an understanding of the processes underpinning instructional excellence for both parties. Additionally, an analysis of the mentoring-reflection process itself ('meta-reflection') adds another dimension to professional growth for the mentor.

## Observation as a tool for mentoring and reflective practice

Similarly, observation can be a powerful 'two-way' window for reflective practice.

Observation used not as an appraisal tool, but as a springboard to provide feedback without judgement, supports a culture of professional sharing and collegial reflection.

In 2005, Powell and Napoliello used observation as a tool to highlight, analyse and improve instruction for differentiated learning in a Malaysian school. In this study, the tool of observation assisted the observers (and the observed) to notice, articulate and connect theory and 'unconscious' practice in expert teachers. The participating teachers actively engaged in

professional reflection, sharing and peer mentoring, and felt that their work was validated by the observation protocol. Over time, both observers and teachers were increasingly aware of the connections between theory and practice in what previously was 'unconscious' teaching practice (Powell & Napoliello, 2005). In this way, observation provided more than simply a linear means for feedback to those observed; it enabled a powerful reciprocity, fostering collegial professional dialogue and reflection on practice.

It must be acknowledged that the 'lens' of the observer influences what is 'noticed'. The perspective of the observer can be affected by a variety of factors, such as the observer's power relationship with the observed, his or her own life experiences and realm of teaching expertise. In the Malaysian study, Powell and Napoliello (2005) admit that, as observers, they did 'see' and notice different things. The authors noted that it is important that observers are supportive, but that they also have their 'eyes open'. In other words, they know what they are looking at.

The personal musicianship of the observer is paramount to having 'eyes open' and being able to provide relevant and useful feedback to the specialist classroom music teacher.

Dewey (in Elliott 1991) puts it this way: 'A skilled surgeon is the one who appreciates the artistry of another surgeon's performance; he [or she] follows it sympathetically, though not overtly, in his [or her] own body. The one who knows something about the relation of the movements of the piano-player to the production of the music from the piano will hear something the mere layman does not perceive' (Elliott, 1991, p.15)

Additionally, an understanding of musical processes and how to cultivate musicianship skills – for example, performing, audition, literacy and creativity - is crucial to insightful observation and informed mentoring of the specialist music teacher.

For the music teacher, the areas of expertise and identity (Harrison, 2010) are two-fold – as musician and as teacher. It follows that mentors of classroom music teachers must be skilled musician-teachers themselves, and that observer-mentors of music teachers must have their eyes 'wide open' to teaching and to musicianship.

## Practise the Practice - musicianship, teaching and reflective practice

Musicianship, teaching, mentoring and reflection are all 'practices' or procedural knowledges, where knowledge is evidenced in the 'doing', in an authentic and practical context. Elliott's work examines the practice of musicianship and uses the term 'praxis'. Musicianship is '... a related network of knowings, not always linear or verbal, but weblike and procedural in essence' (Elliott, 1995, p.68). Schön (1987) calls this type of knowing 'thinking-in-action' and 'knowing-in-action'. Often, 'praxis' is misunderstood and thus can be undermined by ill-informed but common notions that 'practices' are automatic, unthinking, learned skills and techniques, or that they are based on intuition and belong in the realm of the talented.

What is key to understanding the notion of 'praxis' is that it is through the experience that one gains experience. That is, it is via the 'do-ing' that knowledge is acquired and evidenced. Just as students learn about music and science by engaging actively in the practices of these disciplines - that is, by *being* musicians and scientists - the beginning teacher who is being inducted into the practice of teaching and reflective practice does so by actually teaching and reflecting. However, teaching alone and reflecting without guidance will not ensure effective development of teaching practice.

Reflective practice can serve as a very effective means for developing skills and knowledge in a particular discipline. Additionally, observing, articulating and analysing 'praxis' can do much to ensure proper understanding of the deep and applied knowledge required in a particular discipline.

The skills of the effective teacher-mentor are thus multi-faceted. He or she must be adept at the practices of teaching, of critical reflection and mentoring, and of the subject discipline itself.

## Perceptions of teacher competence: connecting teacher training with the realities of the classroom.

In Australia, there is increasing research about teacher preparation and the transition to classroom (Ballantyne, Harrison, Hartwig, Temmerman). 'The lack of connection between initial teacher preparation and the school realities facing new (and experienced) teachers has been the subject of a number of studies worldwide' (Temmerman, 2006, p.10). Ballantyne (2007) documented the reflections of early stage classroom music teachers on their

preparation for the 'real world'. Beginning teachers, on the whole, identified that the pre-service courses in which they participated did not prepare them specifically for the teaching of music. Practicum and general teaching courses were seen to be effective, yet music courses designed specifically for classroom music teaching did not, in their experience, properly prepare students for the 'authentic' music classroom experience.

In America, Gratch's research (1998) about expectations that pre-service teachers had of the beginning years of teaching identified that university structures of graded assessment, which evaluate and affirm 'mastery' and achieving the 'degree', worked against the understanding that teaching skills develop over time and as a result of ongoing fine-tuning and reflection 'in practice'.

Although students may indeed participate in processes of collaboration, reflection and group work in their pre-service courses, skills necessary for their professional lives as teachers, the emphasis on summative assessment creates a conflicting value system for novice teachers.

Within this perceptual framework, stakeholders (pre-service teachers, universities and schools) see the qualification as the indication of 'job-readiness' or competency to teach. However, within the teaching profession itself, experienced teachers are aware that the journey towards competence is based on experience, and takes time, reflection and guidance. The teaching degree is only part of the journey. Indeed, the new National Professional Standards for Teachers here in Australia outlines a career trajectory that acknowledges this journey. 'Graduate', 'proficient', 'highly accomplished' and 'lead' are the descriptors used for a framework of 'graduated competency'.

The transition from teacher preparation to 'classroom realities' requires guidance and reflection and therefore an openness of mind about developing competencies. In Australian research, Harrison (2010) found that experienced teachers support this. 'Experienced teachers advocated mentor-based programs from the earliest stages of the degree, to be maintained throughout the degree and into the first years of teaching' (Harrison 2010, p23). However, perceptions of competency can limit students' willingness to discuss problems and ask for help. Consequently, pre-service teachers are entering the teaching profession unconsciously and '...already resistant to collaboration with other teachers' (Gratch, 1998, p.7).

## Conclusion

'For collaboration to influence professional growth and development it has to be premised upon mutual enquiry and sharing' (Harris, 2002, p.103). The implication is a 'de-privatisation' of teaching, where shared decision-making, reciprocal observation of teaching, critical reflection on one's own and others' teaching practices (in a supportive way), and mentoring, inform and form a strong basis for developing productive practice. This has implications for 'specialist' teachers who work in a specific discipline – for example, classroom music - and may experience professional isolation within their own school.

Lingard and others (2003) advocate that the incorporation of productive practice throughout schools needs leadership both in the formal and teaching contexts. It requires an environment where teachers are intellectually challenged; where there is an opportunity for relevant and inspiring professional development; where collegial and symbiotic relationships can develop in an open and socially supportive way and *reflective practice* is embedded in the daily lives of teachers. Additionally, access to expert mentors and a domain-specific professional community are fundamental to meeting the unique needs of specialist teachers.

This paper has outlined the importance of utilising a variety of tools to support professional practice particular to music education. Professional discourse, observation, mentorship, *reflective practice*, together with access to discipline-specific professional development opportunities and networks, can do much to support the work of teachers in this context. Seeking PD through professional networks and/or finding a mentor with whom to work provide fertile ground for reflective practice for the specialist music teacher and throughout the professional life of a teacher.

Effective mentors of music teachers must be experienced in a variety of practices – as musicians, as teachers, as mentors and as reflective practitioners.

Inducting novice teachers into the culture of schools and classrooms and the practices of collaboration and reflection can begin well ahead of the first year of teaching. Flexible programming currently being explored by universities, and trained mentors, supervisors and expert teachers, both within the university and school contexts, will serve not only to facilitate induction, but will support a perception of teaching as a 'mindful' journey

throughout the years. Pre-service teachers who also become part of a specialist learning community (such as professional organisations) can have substantive dialogue and guidance from specific domain expert teachers as they transition into the 'reality of the classroom' and beyond.

Classroom music teachers experience a unique set of teaching and working circumstances. Differences in pre-service training result in diversity in teacher competencies. This, together with professional isolation created by specialisation, results in differentiated professional needs and creates challenges in providing pertinent professional support within the general school-based professional learning community.

## Meta-reflection and advocacy

For music teachers, it is imperative that they actively participate in and create a culture of reflective practice within a specialised professional learning community. Not only will this enable student outcomes by improving teaching practice, but this 'meta-reflection' will enable articulation of best teaching practice and why it is important. It is this that will do much to strengthen advocacy for a true partnership with other disciplines in the school curriculum. (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs MCEECDYA, 2010).

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