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Considering Beliefs in Learning to Teach Music

By Linda K. Thompson

Alicia, a college freshman, is enrolled in an Introduction to Music Education course. Asked to describe where she sees herself in five years, she states that she definitely wants to be working in a high school band setting so she can work with students "who are really talented and who are in music because they want to be." Another student in her class, Ramon, answers the same question by describing a teacher he had for beginning orchestra who took the time to work with him on an individual basis. He wants to work with a beginning string program and give other students the same opportunity. Their colleague Shonda describes her reasons for wanting to teach elementary general music: "The little kids are so cute—I just love them, and I get along really well with kids, and they seem to like me. I think they'll listen to me better than high schoolers would, and I just think it would be fun."

This scenario reveals much more than just the plans these students have for their futures. Embedded in their statements are beliefs about teaching and learning—beliefs about the roles of teachers and students, music and talent, motivation, classroom management, and the milieu of teaching. Music teacher educators often find that students articulate a wide range of viewpoints, shedding light on who they are, their images of teaching and learning, and their perspectives on the profession. Yet often we do not appropriately acknowledge these beliefs, nor do we usually assist our students in recognizing, making explicit, and examining their beliefs. While the study of teacher beliefs can be messy, "properly assessed and investigated beliefs can be ... the single most important construct in educational research."¹

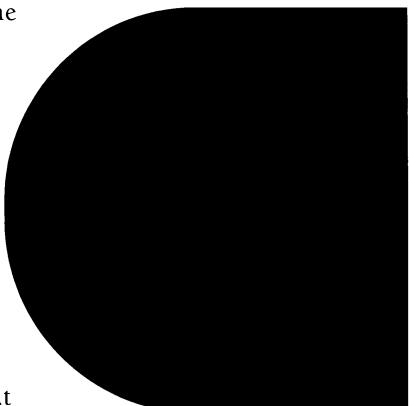
Students' motivations vary, but teacher-educators need to help students examine their beliefs about why they wish to become music teachers.

The importance of examining beliefs of future music educators must not be underestimated. Harm H. Tillema suggests that while beliefs may not solely determine action, our actions cannot be considered apart from beliefs—they are

intermingled. Teachers' beliefs and teachers' actions in classrooms cannot be separated.² Several important questions arise when delving into beliefs about teaching and learning. What do we mean by beliefs? Why is it important to study the beliefs of future music educators? Can beliefs be changed? Is it professionally ethical to attempt to change beliefs of our students? What does the study of beliefs imply for music teacher educators?

Before addressing these questions, we need to ask ourselves about the future of music teacher education and our goals in preparing future music teachers. If we want reform-minded teachers entering our profession, as Dennis Thiessen and Janet R. Barrett suggest, what changes must occur in preservice teacher education?³ If a shift from "teacher as transmitter" to "teacher as collaborator" or "teacher as learner" is 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 who, on entering the field, revert to teaching as they were taught rather than exploring new pedagogies, what experiences can we provide in their teacher education programs to challenge this cycle? Is it our goal to improve and expand current practices in music education or to prepare teachers to fit into current practice? What curricular experiences will foster in future educators a lifelong image of themselves as teacher-as-learner?

Dialogue about these questions and the beliefs of music teacher educators must be the beginning



point for reconceptualizing teacher education. Far too many music teacher education programs lack the cohesiveness necessary to effect change in music education. The need for a defined framework or programmatic orientation becomes evident as we realize that lack of cohesion in teacher preparation programs can lead preservice teachers to see undergraduate education as a checklist of courses and the acquisition of discrete skill sets rather than a holistic, interrelated progression of experiences that fosters the development of their thinking as teachers.

Beliefs Defined

One of the more challenging aspects of studying beliefs is arriving at an agreed-upon definition. Virginia Richardson points out that there is no distinction made between beliefs and knowledge in much of the educational psychological literature.⁴ Knowledge is viewed as subjective, as are beliefs. Although varying definitions have been put forth in the research, Richardson uses a more philosophical definition, stating that a belief is held as truth by the one holding the belief and does not require external validation or evidence of truth. Knowledge does. This definition provides the foundation for the following discussion of beliefs.

Beliefs can act as filters, can be *nested*—situated within and “protected” by other beliefs—or *clustered*—organized or grouped around a specific topic or event—and can therefore become impediments to change. We unconsciously filter virtually everything we experience through our belief systems. If what we learn or experience fits our existing belief system, we easily accept it. If it is not confirmed by our belief system, we

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Their own experiences in school are a source of preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning music.

tend to reject it. In other words, if I believe it, it is true. The nature of beliefs as clustered or nested allows us to hold conflicting beliefs with no apparent discomfort. Clustered beliefs tend to stay clustered, and nested beliefs tend to stay camouflaged by the beliefs in which they are nested. This filtering and clustering nature of beliefs can create obstacles to change. If our natural inclination is to reject ideas that do not fit our belief system, we close ourselves off from change. Because of our natural desire for equilibrium and mental organization, we are

sources: (1) personal experiences, (2) experiences in school, and (3) formal knowledge.

Personal experiences include myriad factors. Family backgrounds, significant others, and the importance attached to learning all affect belief formation. Cultural beliefs are shaped by students' ethnic backgrounds, interactions with cultures different from their own, geographic location, and the norms of the predominant culture. Gender, socioeconomic status, and religious and political backgrounds add to the formation of beliefs about teaching and learning,

beliefs about theory than those who arrive without these experiences. Students who have had extensive private instruction often have a different sense of self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to succeed at a specific task) than do those who lacked the opportunity for individual lessons. The instructional strategies that provided these students with the feelings of success are often assumed to be the best way to teach all students, and beliefs about pedagogical content knowledge that these individuals have formed may actually block the learning experiences of their future students. The assumption "I learned this way—it made sense to me, and I had fun; this is what works" usually leads to replication of past or known practice rather than exploration of new possibilities.

Our Students' Beliefs

Beliefs have been examined in the educational literature both in longitudinal studies following students through preservice teacher preparation programs and by researchers who specifically investigated the beliefs of entering preservice teachers. In music education, although we have fewer studies focusing directly on the entering beliefs of our preservice teachers, we have looked at these individuals' images and metaphors of teaching, their concerns, and specific beliefs such as their conceptions of good teaching and classroom management.⁸ We know that beliefs are powerful, and while we acknowledge that there are differences among the beliefs of entering candidates, the following themes are representative of many prospective educators.

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.⁹ Prospective music teachers often refer to teaching as passing on knowledge and sharing their passion for music. In addition to adhering to this transmission model of teaching, preservice teachers also have strong

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generally content to allow these beliefs to coexist in their respective nests or clusters. It is only when a situation arises that brings conflicting beliefs simultaneously to the forefront that we must acknowledge the contradiction and evaluate these beliefs in light of the new experience.

The tenacious character of beliefs is another defining feature. Beliefs are highly personalized, long-standing, and robust. Although we cannot definitely state that beliefs are fixed, we know they are resistant to change. Belief shifts in adulthood are particularly uncommon, and most often, beliefs are held implicitly. Rarely are beliefs intentionally explored or made explicit, but until this step takes place, change is not likely to occur. These aspects of beliefs hold significant implications for teacher preparation, but in order to address our students' beliefs, we must also understand how teaching beliefs are formed.⁵

The Origin of Teacher Beliefs

Students enter music education programs with definite beliefs about teaching music and about teaching and learning in general. These beliefs generally stem from three

particularly in the ways these factors have affected the student's own experiences in schooling.⁶

Because students enter preservice teacher education programs having experienced up to thirteen years in classrooms with both good and bad teachers, they bring beliefs that are an amalgamation of their experiences as students, and a confidence in their understanding of the role of music educator. Think how frequently we hear students explain their positions on educational issues with the preface, "Well, when I was in school, we ..." or "The way my teachers did this was ...," indicating a familiarity with, and assumptions about, the role of educator as well as the ideas of teaching and learning. This concept of an "apprenticeship of observation," as originated by Dan Lortie, underscores the strength of experiences in school on the formation of beliefs about teaching and learning.⁷

Likewise, the formal knowledge these students gained in schools or in private music instruction creates belief structures about music and musical experiences. Students who enrolled in high school AP music theory will likely enter university music programs with different

conceptions of teaching as nurturing and caring. Entering preservice music educators value the humanistic aspects of teaching and emphasize valuing students and their opinions and connecting with their students. An often-expressed belief is that music should be “fun,” yet many future teachers are able to articulate only a very few ideas about the complex nature of teaching and the many factors the teacher must take into account in ensuring that the class is indeed fun. Many preservice teachers believe that students in ensembles are there because they are talented and want to be in music, with the assumption that discipline will not be an issue. Yet, paradoxically, the same preservice teachers also frequently hold beliefs and have concerns about the challenges they will face regarding classroom management.

Often teacher candidates believe that learning to teach will occur once they are in schools with “a real teacher and real students,” and they express uncertainty about the role of the university in the process of learning to teach. Preservice teachers’ images of teaching remain fairly constant throughout the teacher education program. When they enter schools for extended field experiences and practica (prior to student teaching), however, their images of teaching do seem to expand. It is common for participants in the same teacher education program to enter student teaching with greatly differing beliefs about what constitutes good teaching. How do these beliefs affect preservice teachers’ development, particularly as they enter K–12 settings for student-teaching experiences? Does student teaching act as a corrective or as a reinforcer?

The Influence of Beliefs

Researchers in education have uncovered substantial evidence suggesting that the beliefs of preservice teachers strongly influence what they learn, how they learn, their levels of engagement in the teacher education program, and, ultimately, their work as teachers.¹⁰ Students tend to accept easily those parts of the curriculum that mesh with their

preexisting belief structures (“That’s just what I thought” or “I knew that already”) and reject or dismiss those aspects of the curriculum that are in conflict with their beliefs (“This will never work,” or “The students would never like that”). For example, a student who experienced a very traditional performance-based high school program may reject constructivist pedagogical approaches. Students who see teachers as transmitters may question the viability of giving their future students opportunities to make personal musical decisions, believing that it is more appropriate to tell and explain, even though these same preservice teachers may advocate greater student empowerment in the classroom.

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. Beliefs that learning to teach occurs only when future teachers are able to interact in K–12 settings may cause preservice teachers to see the

promote? In other words, how can we strengthen our preservice teachers’ educationally sound beliefs, expand their simplistic or narrow images of teaching, and foster change in those ideas and dispositions that conflict with what we hold as best practice?

Research done from the mid-1980s through the early 1990s suggested that teacher education programs were not successful at influencing the beliefs of teacher candidates. Indeed, when considering the nature of beliefs, it would seem unrealistic to expect to change them. But more recent pedagogical approaches, particularly strategies that are constructivist in nature and that require high levels of personal reflection, do seem to bring about shifts in belief structures.¹¹

When the goal is encouraging students to examine their belief structures, the first step must be to create opportunities for preservice teachers to uncover their beliefs about teaching and learning. Only as they acknowledge and articulate their beliefs will they have a basis to explore the origins of their beliefs, the viability of those beliefs in light of their experiences in the teacher

Students must have ongoing opportunities for uncovering, examining, reflecting, and refining beliefs.

more academic parts of the undergraduate program as the checklist described earlier, lacking cohesion and significance for what they consider the real tasks of teaching. It is common for preservice teachers to state that the best way to learn to teach is hands-on—and while there is validity to that statement, it cannot be the sole framework for teacher education.

Changing Beliefs

With this understanding of beliefs, we are faced with a two-part question: Can we change beliefs, and if so, what beliefs should we

education program, and their willingness to make commitments to strengthen or change these beliefs. Only as music teacher educators understand the beliefs of their students will they appropriately identify the kinds of experiences that will require these students to reconsider their beliefs in light of practice, theory, and research. Equally important, students must have ongoing opportunities for uncovering, examining, reflecting, and refining beliefs throughout their program. While experiences in a single course can be valuable, multiple opportunities to examine beliefs in various contexts

Exploring Preservice Teachers' Beliefs

The following list of strategies, although not new, when continuously embedded throughout the program, can serve the goal of preservice teachers' reflecting on their own experiences in schools, creating powerful opportunities to uncover and examine their beliefs about teaching and learning.

- Case analyses (written and video)
- Action research
- Problem-based learning
- Online discussions/blogs
- Autobiographies
- Generation of metaphors (e.g., teacher as tour guide, teacher as gardener)
- Analysis of personal teaching experiences
- Articulation and analysis of images of teaching, learning, subject matter, context
- Explicit discussion of beliefs
- Reflections on classroom and teaching experiences
- Creation of conceptual maps of planning and teaching experiences
- Analysis of videos of self and others teaching
- Carefully constructed guided observations
- School histories
- Shadow studies (planned, structured, and documented observation of a teacher for a specific period of time)
- Analysis of curriculum/materials
- Classroom studies
- Dialogue journals

are essential if this process is to become a lifelong professional disposition.

Helping students explore and evaluate their beliefs must be intentional and should include multiple opportunities for reflection and inquiry. Particularly effective strategies focus on the prospective teacher as learner. Critical examination and analysis of beliefs can occur as students write their life histories and educational biographies, exploring formative influences. Creating personal metaphors of teaching and learning can provide preservice teachers opportunities for seeing themselves as agents of their own learning and socialization. Discussion and reflection focused on these metaphors can lead to adoption of different metaphors that may more accurately encompass new or different theories, perspectives, and pedagogies representing promising research-based practices. Ample opportunities for students to engage in reflective practice are vital for establishing a disposition of ongoing self-assessment. Reflection can include use of tools such as dialogue

journals and field-experience logs in which students record their internal dialogues as they make sense of challenging situations and consider new ideas. (See the sidebar, Exploring Preservice Teachers' Beliefs.)

Opportunities to evaluate beliefs about teaching and teacher role identity in relation to the context of teaching are essential for preservice teachers to gain perspectives as insiders to the profession. Studying the interactions of teacher, learner, subject, and milieu in a specific classroom, or analyzing videotape from actual practice can serve to further reveal to preservice teachers both their own beliefs and preconceptions about teaching and learning music. These contextualized experiences have perhaps the greatest potential to influence ongoing development and refinement of teacher beliefs.

The overarching goal in these approaches to examining, challenging, and refining beliefs is to further the concept of teacher education as a transformative process. Future teachers are presented with opportunities to question assumptions in an environment designed to cultivate

dispositions of inquiry, analysis, and reflection. They must be challenged to look at alternatives to their current images of music education and create visions of what might be possible with a broader perspective of music education. Of course, these approaches are not as potent without meaningful engagement on the part of the music teacher educator guiding the experiences and facilitating reflection on those experiences.

An Ethical Question

In any discussion of efforts to change beliefs, we must ask ourselves whether what we are doing is ethical. Should we ask others to change? What beliefs are we asking them to adopt? How do we respond to those individuals who, at the end of their teacher education program, have not changed what we might consider inappropriate beliefs? Is change always valuable? Rather than to hold discourse about changing beliefs, would it be more palatable, as James Raths asks, to create a limited but well-defined framework of teacher dispositions and establish expectations for our students to reflect those dispositions?¹²

These are difficult questions. We as music teacher educators must carefully consider our own conceptions of teaching, learning, and knowledge, and continually evaluate our own beliefs in light of new research, promising practices, and current theoretical understandings. In doing so, we position ourselves to "engage prospective teachers in a critical examination of their entering beliefs in light of compelling alternatives and help them develop powerful images of good teaching and strong professional commitments."¹³ If we choose to disregard the entering beliefs of preservice music educators, those unchallenged beliefs will have a marked effect on the perspectives and practices of future music educators, most likely reinforcing "business as usual."

Model the Change

A commitment to guiding students' developing understandings of themselves as teachers will likely

require some changes on the part of music teacher educators. Eunice Boardman's challenge from 1990 continues to be particularly salient for both music teacher educators and preservice teachers:

We must ... be willing to discard familiar practices, search for new processes, and consider implications of new information. In other words, we must be brave enough to continue to alter, expand, and refine our personal teaching schema. This is difficult to do; it is difficult to admit, even to oneself, that previously held assumptions may no longer be valid. However, if we are not willing to venture farther along our personal learning spirals, we cannot create new teacher education programs appropriate for the next generation of public school teachers."¹⁴

Notes

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