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ENHANCING INTERACTION BETWEEN UNIVERSITY & PUBLIC

SCHOOL MUSIC TEACHERS: THE DESIGN AND IMPACT OF A LOCAL

NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROJECT

(APA)

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Enhancing Interaction Between University & Public-School Music Teachers:

The Design and Impact of a Local Needs Assessment Project

The responsibility of university faculty to oversee the placement and supervision of music education student teachers is awesome. Familiarity with public school music programs and their instructors is an essential component of this responsibility. As new faculty members of a large Midwestern university music education program, it was necessary for us to become familiar with the nature of music instruction in local school systems. In doing so, we confirmed a need for enhanced communication between the schools and the university. Initiating dialogues with school music teachers was important to better guide the placement of music student teachers in the field and also to become familiar with the particular needs of these local school music programs. What developed from this need for enhanced communication was an assessment study to initiate conversations with practicing music teachers and to observe them in their teaching environments.

Project Design

As found by Grice (1986), needs assessments can lead to valuable insights toward the educational goals of instrumental music programs, lead to staff development strategies to assist educational needs, and assist in focusing teacher education around the needs of the practitioner. The primary goals of this project were to determine the values, attitudes, performance levels, and conditions of instrumental music education in the elementary through high schools located in

a 65-mile radius of the university and to come to understand their instructional needs. Additional goals were to lay groundwork for future relationships and create an informational database to assist in future communication with practicing teachers. In order to best prepare pre-service teachers for successful entry into the local educational environment, an understanding of the needs and intentions was essential.

The first step was to determine the educational opportunities provided in area school music programs as a foundation to understand the instructional needs. Undertaking an investigation that examines perceived needs of practicing teachers rather than observing measurable behaviors exhibited during teaching necessitated a design that provided an environment of trust and cooperation. All unfamiliar elementary, middle, and high school instrumental music instructors within a 65-mile radius of the university were contacted (66 teachers from 55 different schools) through a standard mailing that introduced the instrumental music teacher-education faculty and stated a desire to become acquainted with all the area school instrumental music teachers. This letter was designed with the intent of being non-threatening in consideration for those who may perceive university faculty as judgmental towards their program.

The letters were followed by telephone calls with a purpose of coordinating a meeting at each prospective school. Each meeting (60 teachers from 52 different schools) included informal introductions, tour of the music facilities, and a 30-45 minute interview with the teacher. In order to further

promote a non-threatening atmosphere for the meetings, interviews were not recorded. Interviews focused on the instrumental music program including curricular offerings, educational emphasis and school culture. Also pursued was information leading to an understanding of the instructors' background and perceived struggles and needs as practicing school music teachers (*see Figure 1 for interview questions).* To conclude, each individual was asked to offer advice to pre-service music teachers preparing to enter the field. Follow-up visits with many of the directors (over 50%) offered further observations of instruction as well as opportunities for the investigators to serve as guest ensemble clinicians.

Detailed field notes were taken and transcribed immediately following each meeting. The case studies were synthesized through cross-analysis by identifying recurring themes and patterns among the instrumental programs while exposing uniqueness. The aggregation of data did not aim to exclude independent needs but treated each item as an important data source. All data collection took place during the 2003-2004 academic year.

Findings

Similar to a needs study of Barnett and Greenough (1999), four broad areas of concern emerged from the interviews. In understanding school music program culture, it was first necessary to provide the needed context for the discussion. Since this project was primarily a study of directors' perceptions, understanding their work environment was important in establishing this context. Second, a look at the needs and struggles of the directors, collectively, was warranted to help identify and further support what was

important to them (e.g., education-related philosophy). From this, each program's unique

(and possibly restricting) characteristics in relation to their director's philosophical

understandings was discovered in addition to an overall understanding of school music

teaching within the context of the local school music program culture. Lastly, examining

the directors' declared advice for music teachers soon-to-be entering the profession for

the first time 'triangulated' the data (e.g., what they gave for advice should be, at

minimum, directly influenced by the program's culture, their philosophy, and ideas of

struggles and needs). All three 'lenses' enhanced the understanding of what it is, for these

directors, to be a school music teacher.

Program Emphasis

While each school music program certainly has its own unique and

specific culture, data generated through this project presented four generalized

areas of commonality. It appeared that competition through performance was an

important component of local school music program culture. Linked to this

theme, a focus on student performance achievement helps support this ideology.

However, in somewhat contrast to the performance foci, several programs also

reported a more comprehensive approach to school music instruction. Finally,

most of the school music directors reported that music teaching/learning is a

social event, and their programs reflect this characteristic.

Success in competition. Many directors reported to be very interested in

achieving success, as a program, in several competition-related activities and

arenas. From marching-related endeavors (e.g., state-sponsored marching band

contests, winter drumline, winter guard) to the concert wind band setting, success in the form of rankings and ratings at large-group contests were high on the priority lists for many directors. Little mention of solo, chamber, or non-competition focused performances was discussed. As a result, an emphasis on a smaller scope of repertoire over the course of an academic year was prevalent.

Student achievement. Programs appeared to be geared toward student achievement above all else. Ratings, rankings, awards, accolades, trophies, and trinkets were all important representations of student achievement. Large ensembles consisting of as many students as possible seem to be the desire of these directors – little attention/focus was placed on chamber music opportunities for students. High student enrollment in the band program was a goal for most directors as recruiting and retaining students were important discussion points in the conversations. Accolades for student productivity in the form of achievement through various contests and competitions were motivational tools to keep students involved in the band programs.

Comprehensive musicianship. While many programs were very traditional in their offerings and curricula, several others demonstrated emphasis toward comprehensive musical experiences for students. Many programs offered jazz education before or after school. Some programs included not only a 'big band' setting but also several smaller jazz combo opportunities for students to learn improvisation in a more intimate setting. Several of the programs that offered these types of experiences also were more likely to offer a wider variety

of other musical experiences, such as chamber ensemble work, composition/music theory instruction, music technology education, and cross-disciplinary collaborations (e.g., vocal music, theater/drama).

Social learning. Overall, most philosophic notions of the instrumental programs held social learning and working environment in high regard. Directors reported the desire to create environments where students work comfortably with each other, enjoy the experiences of making music in an ensemble, and cooperatively interact toward a unified goal or objective. This social environment is perpetuated by various ensemble performance tour opportunities. For example, through the competitive marching band circuit, students execute duties beyond performing within an ensemble setting. These opportunities are intended to provide the students with understandings of the social environment enhancing concepts of work ethic, personal responsibility, cooperation, collaboration, and collective ownership of the process and product. Interpersonal skills, abilities that transcend music education, are considered important and necessary for a society to exist and prosper. For many directors, having students engaged in developing these 'life skills' was a central component and emphasis of their music program.

Needs and Struggles

Beyond describing individual and collective school music program characteristics, this project also had the specific intent of identifying the needs of the directors. A better idea of the culture that surrounds and supports each

program was achieved through understanding these needs, struggles, and emphases of each director. Needs and struggles often walk hand-in-hand; understanding one leads to understanding the other. These directors were quite forthcoming with information, and the resulting analysis of the data from the interviews yielded three thematic 'streams' that represent the relationships of their self-reported struggles as school music teachers: 1) student-related struggles, 2) schedule-related struggles, and 3) support-related struggles.

Student-related. Supporting findings from Heston et al. (1996), when discussing student-related struggles, the most mentioned issue dealt with the perceived poor (or lack of) student work ethic. Many directors stated that the majority of their students were not highly committed to the band program. Directors struggled with trying to find ways to motivate their students to not only practice, but also to be involved with the program beyond the minimum expectations. This lack of effort by the students in turn creates inhibited performance skills, which results in negatively impacting the performance level of the ensembles. Ultimately, it appeared that the lowered ability/skill level of the ensemble was the most pressing issue for many of these directors as the success level of the program was at stake.

Schedule-related. Directors also mentioned several issues relating to the often complicated and time-restrictive schedules in which they operate their music programs. As the research literature also claims (e.g., Hamann & Duagherty, 1984; Heston et al., 1996; Scheib, 2003; Scheib, 2004), the most often

cited complaint dealt with not having enough time to fulfill all the duties, or expectations, of their job as a band director – both in administrative tasks and instructional responsibilities. Part of the problem, for several of these directors, was due to having to operate their programs within various school-wide schedules that did not allow them adequate time for instruction on a day-to-day basis. In a few examples, directors were responsible for teaching courses outside of instrumental music. In addition to being responsible for the band program, a few directors were also assigned to teaching one or two periods of a non-music subject (e.g., English, math, science). For these directors, being a 'part-time music teacher' was a constant struggle.

Support-related. The third area most reported as a struggle for these directors involved a lack of support upon which to operate their music programs – issues also well documented in the existing research literature (e.g., Gordon, 2000; Krueger, 2000; Madsen & Hancock, 2002; Nimmo, 1986; Scheib, 2004; Scheib, 2005). Among the issues, a lack of financial, administrative, and parental support was repeatedly mentioned. This perceived lack of support presented itself with issues relating to inadequate staffing for their programs, inadequate facilities in which to operate their programs, and an overall school-wide educational emphasis away from the arts. As a result, directors felt they continually need to be proactive in music and arts advocacy in their school and community, an expectation that can be all too consuming in their occupation as a school music teacher. This ever increasing expectation leads to further issues relating to the

schedule-related struggles mentioned above, where the needed time to adequately fulfill the multiple roles expected of them (e.g., teacher, administrator, advocate) is at a premium, and leaves little time left to lead a satisfactory personal life (e.g., role as spouse, parent, individual). Additionally, the consuming nature of the administrator and advocate roles leaves little time left for adequate planning for teaching and assessing their students, two items many of these directors feel is lacking in their day-to-day work routine. These *role conflicts* (Kahn et al, 1964; Scheib, 2003) appear to be a significant part of the day-to-day struggle for these directors.

The additional emphasis by their districts on state and federally mandated standardized testing added a third layer to their struggles, where music courses, because of their marginalized status as a 'special' or 'non-academic' subject, is not required nor emphasized in these initiatives. While most directors were relieved that music was not a part of this annual district-wide standardized testing, being absent from this cohort of subjects further perpetuates the notion that music is excluded from the list of 'official' or 'important' learning. Also, music students that performed poorly on standardized tests were removed from music rehearsals in order to receive 'remediation' in the core academic areas in which they were determined to be deficient – a further blow to the academic or 'official' status of music as an important subject to be studied.

Advice for New Teachers

In addition to providing information on their programs and professional needs, directors interviewed for this study were quick to give advice to pre-service teachers soon to be entering the profession. Among all things, many of the directors mentioned the ability to multi-task as a critical skill. No doubt, this piece of advice can be linked to the schedule-related struggles many of them encounter. Multi-tasking, multi-skilling according to Zehava (2001), positively contributes to surviving the expectations of teaching deterring the onset of burnout. The need for teachers to be organized, have well thought-out plans, and to thoroughly understand the content they teach are all additional bits of counsel communicated by these directors that will help the newly-inducted novice teacher successfully navigate their impending busy professional life.

Directors were also thoughtful in encouraging new teachers to be patient with students, though firm and assertive, when dealing with both instructional and behavioral problems in class. However, they strongly advised against singling-out students in front of their peers (e.g., rehearsal). Handling individual student issues in private consultation was recommended. In agreement with Hewitt (1999), confrontation occurs in classrooms where the teacher is not properly trained to manage severe behavioral problems.

Communication was a central theme to several of the directors' prescriptions for success on the job. New teachers should be diligent in their communication with colleagues, administration, and parents, in particular. Upholding professionalism in all dealings with these groups was also advised.

One way towards this goal is to identify oneself with being an educator, first and foremost – a *music* teacher second. In believing yourself to be a member of an educational institution's education faculty in charge of the well-being of your students (above all else) appears to be the 'key' to professional success for many directors. The need for networking with other *educators* was also among the most referenced tips.

Many of the directors suggested the need for pursuing graduate work as soon as possible. The benefits of this, reportedly, were two fold: It helped further the teachers' professional development and provided them with financial compensation in the form of an increase in salary.

Finally, the recommendation for taking care of oneself in their personal and professional life was purported as being beneficial for success as a school music teacher. "Enjoy your triumphs, no matter how small," was mentioned specifically by one director weighing the need for professional self-acknowledgement of success during those difficult (and sometimes victory-barren) first few years of teaching. The need for committing oneself to activities "outside of school" was also mentioned as critical to maintaining balance in one's life, especially considering the demanding professional schedule of the school music teacher that all too often tips the scale away from having a life removed from the job's responsibilities.

Impact on Music Teacher Education Program

The findings from this study were very insightful to the understanding of local instrumental school music culture for the investigators. However, as Graue & Walsh (1998) remind us, valid research should have ends that benefit the profession. Likewise, answering Kimpton's (2005) call to arms and supporting Robbins & Stein's (2005) suggestions in the Spring 2005 JMTE special issue on the future of music teacher education, the findings from this project *needed* to have "legs." As for the results of this study and their impact on preparing school music teachers at the investigators' institution, the ramifications were far-reaching.

Methods Courses

Information collected from the area directors regarding their specific program designs, local school and community culture, and their professional needs and struggles greatly enhanced instruction of methods courses through both curricula and course design. A critical part of methods course instruction deals with attempting to best prepare students to enter the complex world of teaching. To do so, pre-service teachers need to understand the context into which they will be expected to teach (e.g., the school setting). In agreement with Paul (1998), field experiences are crucial for students to understand this context. Having this information helped identify programs that would be best suited for methods course-related field experiences. Understandings gained from this

study also transferred to the methods classroom and often provided the needed frame for discussions and dialogue concerning broader pedagogical issues.

Administration Course

As a result of the communication with area music teachers, collaborations were developed to enhance a course for all music education majors titled *Administration of School Music Programs*. This course covers many essential administrative skills and necessary understandings relevant to teaching music in the schools. Prior to this study, most if not all topics were handled conceptually through readings and discussion. This study exposed strengths of area teachers providing opportunities to allow them to share their expertise with the music education students. Selected teachers discussed working with parents, fundraising, organizing trips and traveling with students, solving scheduling conflicts, planning within a block schedule, and dealing with classroom management situations.

Collaborative projects were developed that allowed students to experience authentic administrative duties of music teachers while assisting area teachers in fulfilling their responsibilities. One project taught students the budget process involved in equipment purchasing. This budget project focused on schools of area teachers who had described equipment needs. The teacher provided a detailed equipment inventory including the replacement and repair needs, student participation list, and program goals. The music education students assessed the equipment purchase and repair needs for the next five years. At the

completion of the project, the teacher was presented with a formal purchase proposal with researched bids, thorough rationale, and appropriate letters to administration.

Another project involved music education students researching, proposing, and developing travel itineraries for area schools intent on future music trips. Service projects also included organizing and filing of printed music, inventorying instruments, and assisting of scheduling for local schools. Instructional activities that replicate the authentic teaching experience in schools give students the opportunity to experience the role of a practitioner and become familiar with the context experienced as a teacher supporting the findings of Paul, et al. (2001).

Instrument Techniques Courses

Instrumental techniques courses also benefited by the information gained from this project. Local contact offered the opportunity for the music education students learning a new instrument to experience teaching beginners on this unfamiliar instrument. This typically had been accomplished through peer teaching but the experience of teaching a college level peer is not as authentic as young beginners because their peers already have a strong foundation in music understanding. This authentic teaching experience has been valuable and enlightening for the novice teachers. Instrument repair workshops have been added to the curriculum through collaborations developed with area instrument retailers. To provide context in understanding the process of starting beginners

on instruments, area teachers volunteered to be interviewed by music education

students concerning the organization of their starter program.

Field Experience & Student Teaching

As stated earlier, the process of assigning field experience sites for

students was greatly informed through the findings from this project – not only

in identifying sites, but also in being able to expand placement opportunities.

Contacts made to area teachers have exposed talented teachers not previously

involved with the university. These contacts expanded observation opportunities

for music education students to experience outstanding music teaching in inner-

city situations. The exposure through school visits and having these teachers as

guest speakers has benefited our students by encouraging consideration of such

sites as student teaching experiences. A database was created and utilized that

contained important information on each music program with detailed

accounting of the findings from this project specific to each school. Efforts to

track directors and programs as they evolve over time continue to be an

important component to maintaining this database. Future field experience and

student teaching sites are able to be determined more effectively and efficiently

by correlating student data with site characteristics.

Project Conclusions

Enhanced communication of the university faculty with teachers in the

field and understanding of the educational needs of practicing teachers allowed

for collaborations, outreach opportunities, and expanded research possibilities.

Similar to an educational needs assessment by Barbe (1989), course offerings to the music education students were enhanced and understandings of area music programs contributed to matching appropriate placements for student teachers.

Increased exposure of the music education faculty to practicing teachers made a positive impact upon the relationship of the university with practicing music teachers. As university faculty, it is advantageous to develop professional relationships with area schools and their instructors. Familiarity provides a foundation for association between the music education department and surrounding schools. This relationship of trust between school music teachers and university faculty supports opportunities for professional development for practitioners, pre-service teachers, and university music education faculty alike – a partnership that truly yields benefits for all. Understanding the local context in which music education exists is a critical first step towards developing these opportunities.

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Figure 1: **Interview questions.**

1. [Background] Tell us a little bit about your background, where you grew up, what school(s) you attended, activities you were involved with (e.g., bands, corps, youth orchestras, jazz, musicals)? How did you come to be here?

2. [Demographics] How many students in the total school population? How many students involved with the band program? What other music (non-band related) offerings are available to students? What type of schedule does the school operate (e.g., 7 periods, block)?

3. [Curriculum] What are the different ensembles/courses/topics you offer students through your band program? When do they meet? What is the emphasis of the program (e.g., marching, concert, jazz, chamber, solo/ensemble)? What would a graduating band student say about what they got out of being involved in your program?

4. [Beliefs / Needs] What are the struggles you face as a school band director / school teacher? What are the joys? What advice would you give to a new school music teacher just entering their first job? What do you believe to be the most important understandings/abilities a music teacher should possess?