

The biography of music teachers, their understanding of musicality and the implications for secondary music education

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarises some of the key features of a doctoral research study into the influence that music teacher biography (background, education, environment) has on their practice as a teacher in the secondary music classroom in England. The research focuses principally on the development of a range of competencies and learning contexts necessary to the growing musician and how far these can be observed in the activities in which the young people participate in the classroom and the priorities placed upon them by the teachers. Springing from this research has also been a consideration of the developing identity of the music teacher, especially where it may conflict with their identity as a musician. There are a number of implications for teachers themselves, for schools and local authorities, as well as for education policy and its makers.

KEYWORDS

MUSICIAN
MUSIC TEACHER
IDENTITY
MUSICAL COMPETENCY
TEACHER
BIOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that music is at the core of most people's lives (Clarke et al. 2010; Welch 2012) and, perhaps, especially the lives of young people. For evidence of this, it is only necessary to look around when you are travelling on the tube, the bus, or simply walking in the street: a significant number will have earphones and they will be listening to music played on their mobile devices. The British Music Rights Survey in 2008 (Welch 2012) found that 14- to 17-year-olds listen to

music, actively or passively, for over six hours per day.

Despite the importance of music in young people's lives, there is evidence that school music in England doesn't always address their needs and interests (Welch 2012). The uptake at GCSE is one of the lowest for any curriculum subject, at around 7–8% of the total cohort (Welch 2012) and has been at around this figure for many years; and uptake is even smaller at Advanced level at 1.3% (McQueen & Hallam 2010). In addition, schools

and their teachers are sometimes criticised because at Key Stage 3, where music is still a compulsory area of the curriculum, pupils do not make sufficient progress (Ofsted, 2009, 2012). In Ofsted's triennial music report of 2012, pupils met musical expectations in only 40% of schools visited (Ofsted, 2012). One cannot help but wonder about the place and value of music in education. However, in contrast, there is considerable evidence, from Plato to the current period, that music education does have a value, in terms of musical

development itself, but also in terms of the wider physical, emotional and academic benefits (Plato 4th c. BC [1892]; Rousseau 1779 [2003]; Dalcroze 1905; Paynter 1982; QCA 2007).

There is therefore a dichotomy here which is proving a challenge to solve and it becomes necessary to explore some of the reasons for this difficulty. The PhD study at the centre of this paper has taken the stance that part of the problem may lie in music teachers themselves and where they 'come from', in terms of their own backgrounds, education, development and identity as musicians; and, as a result, how far this may impact upon their values and understandings of what it actually is to be a musician.

There have been several studies, in the UK alone, on the characteristics of classroom music teachers and these include the Valuing school music report produced for the University of Westminster and Rocks School (York 2001); the Creating a land with music report on the work, education and training of professional musicians (including teachers), produced for Youth Music (Rogers 2002); and the Teacher identities in music education, or TIME, studies completed over a number of years as part of an Economic and Social Research Council research project (Welch et al. 2011). Looking at these studies and others, there are a number of traits that are particularly pertinent to this current study, for example that:

- classroom music teachers are almost exclusively white
- they are frequently trained in the Western classical music tradition
- they will have received a fairly conservative and traditional education of GCSE (or O-level) music, A-level music, a music degree at a university or music conservatoire, and then straight into teaching following the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) route; in many cases the degree will

either be in performance studies on a principal instrument or voice, or in music studies

- their principal instrument will usually be piano or vocals – Welch et al. (2011) found that 90% of teachers were 'first-study' pianists
- most will have had additional, and frequently private, music teaching on their main instrument supplementary to any learning that may have taken place in school
- many have experience in orchestral playing but significantly fewer are experienced in jazz, popular, traditional or non-Western traditions
- for many, there are significant gaps in knowledge and skills in composing, the contemporary popular genres, and music-related technology
- 70% will have had some teaching experience as an instrumental or voice teacher.

As many music teachers seem to have similar biographical traits, there seems to be a dilemma, which Welch (2012) has termed the 'cycle of persistence', in which music teachers with one type of biography will frequently support and 'produce' future musicians with similar characteristics, and so the dichotomy outlined earlier persists.

RESEARCH METHODS AND SAMPLE FINDINGS

The key research question of my doctoral study has been: 'Is there any relationship between what is taught in class music and a music teacher's biography?' The theoretical framework is based on the idea that we are all products of our biography (Brofenbrenner 1979), that our biography and identity have a reciprocal effect on each other (Kidd & Teagle 2012) and that both of these will impact on class practice in an educational climate where all children are considered to have the potential for musicianship (Welch 2001;

Mills 2005).

A mixed-methods approach was taken, including collaborative exploration of musical competencies with secondary teacher trainees, 'sorting' or prioritising activities, surveys, observations of secondary music teaching, and interviews focusing on the observed practice and biographical traits. The research sample included secondary music teacher trainees, experienced music teachers in secondary schools and a small selection of specialist music undergraduates. The core participant group (CPG) for the observations and interviews included six teacher trainees and five music teachers working in schools in east London boroughs.

Fundamental to the study was exploring the nature of musicianship and what teachers understand of their role in developing young musicians. As part of this, and core to the research, was the drawing-up of 12 competencies for the development of musicianship. These were derived from both the literature and from exploratory discussions and debates with trainees on PGCE and GTP secondary music programmes. The implication is not that all musicians will necessarily have developed all these competencies, but that many will be developing a proficiency in a number of them. Going hand-in-hand with these have also been 12 contexts in which musicianship will frequently develop or be influenced. Much of the rest of the research activity and findings centred on these two lists.

In Table 1, the musical competencies are listed in the left half and the contexts in the right half. In one of the research activities, participants (n=39) were asked to rank each of the items in the two lists in order of perceived importance in the development of musicianship, from '1' being the most important to '12' being the least. The data in the third column of each half in table 1 ('Sorting activity MR') shows the mean rankings for these. The data in the second column of each half is what has been termed the 'observed

significance score', where if a focus on a particular competency was observed during a lesson (n=11), it was given a score from 1 to 3, '1' signifying a minor focus and '3' where it was a core part of the learning. These 'observed significance scores', again, have then been ranked for ease of comparison in this table. MR in Table 1 refers to mean ranking and RM to relative mean, where the mean is taken as the arithmetic average of the data and the 'relative mean' is the average over all the lessons observed including where 'null' OSSs are counted as zero.

In analysing the data in Table 1, two points will be examined in a little more detail. In the musical competencies data, participants ranked 'composing' as a fairly important competency for developing musicians to acquire – ranked in 5th position. The rankings of the observed significance scores also place it in the top half (6th). In as many as 40% of lessons observed, the activities of composing or improvising were a focus of the teaching and learning. The National Curriculum also places devising one's own music as one of a triumvirate of principal musical activities: performing, devising, and listening. However, in the survey/questionnaire carried out with the entire participant group (n=64), 40% of the respondents indicated that they were not particularly experienced in composing; and Harris & Hawksley (1989) argued that 'many music teachers compose, but few have learned about music through composing' (Harris & Hawksley 1989: 7). There is a fundamental indication in the research that, while composing is a core activity in music lessons and within the curriculum, many teachers have little experience as active composers. This was observed in practice in a music lesson given by one teacher-participant, an experienced music teacher endeavouring to encourage his students to compose but who, ultimately, provided them with little guidance on the actual process of composing. Consequently, outcomes tended to lack 'shape' and direction.

TABLE 1

Comparison of perceived importance of musical concepts and learning contexts with observed significance in class music lessons

Musical competences	OSS ranking (from RM)	Sorting Activity MR	Learning contexts	OSS ranking (from RM)	Sorting Activity MR
Performing on an instrument	1	1	A teacher (class or instrument)	1	3
Composing	6	5	Performing with others	2	1
Improvising	9	6	Role models / musicians I admire	3	5
Use of musical terminology	5	10	Family and/or friends	4	6
Reading from staff notation	9	9	Regular music practice	7	2
Singing with accurate intonation	7	3	Being a teacher to others	11	9
Use of ICT to develop music	4	12	Composing	10	11
Performing music 'by ear'	2	2	Attending live musical perfs.	8	8
Harmonization of melodies	12	11	Academic musical studies	8	12
General knowledge of range of musics	3	7	Listening to recorded music	5	4
Relate to the expressive content	11	8	Performing to an audience	5	7
Aural analysis between sounds	7	4	Jamming / improvising	11	10

In examining the contexts in which musicians learn their craft, participants ranked 'regular practice' as essential in the development of musicianship – in 2nd place. In observation of actuality, pupils having the opportunity to practise or rehearse their music for any length of time over a series of lessons was less evident. It has been widely attested that a professional musician will accumulate as many as 10,000 hours of formal practice by the age of 21 (Ericsson et al. 2006; McPherson et al., 2012). There is a general acknowledgement that serious development as a musician can be a time-consuming task. Yet, not only were regular opportunities over a period of time rarely provided for the development of performing and composing activities within this research but, even within a single lesson, the average time spent on the development of any one or more of the musical competencies was just 57%. It would seem that time for a genuine development of musicianship in schools can be highly restricted, both by a reduction in the amount of time in a school timetable devoted to the subject and by a range of policies and routines within a school which take away from the main musical learning focus. The latter include an increasing focus on evaluation of progress and setting targets for development, with young people frequently having to spend time away from practical musical activity by writing these down. In the observation of one

trainee teacher's one-hour lesson, there was no active engagement with music until 22 minutes into the lesson, and the plan for this lesson was 'approved' by her more experienced teacher mentor.

DISCUSSION

There have been a number of issues highlighted by this research. In the first instance, there appears to be a disjunct between the interests and expertise of teachers, having been trained principally in the Western classical tradition, and those of their pupils. This is not a new discovery but the data would confirm the accuracy of what has previously been argued: eg in the case of one trainee teacher's lesson founded on popular music songwriting with the use of computer technology and where the trainee's background was firmly rooted in Western classical music, with limited experience of either the popular music culture or music technology.

As potential teachers develop in their musical and academic studies, there is a tendency towards more and more specialisation and a narrowing of knowledge and skills, for example, in performance or in music technology. However, the school curriculum demands a broad knowledge and skill-set from its teachers. Among the study participants, 76% attained grade 8 in a musical instrument/voice; 89% attained GCSE or O-level music; 91% attained A-level

music; and 78% value instrumental/vocal performance as the most important musical competency. In discussing the education of musicians, Spruce & Matthews (2012) argue that, despite efforts to include music from a range of cultures and traditions, education and its learning methods are still rooted in the Western musical tradition; and Saunders & Welch (2012) suggest that teachers are not generally equipped to teach the wider range of musics that might form part of a school curriculum. In considering examples where teachers seem to contradict this 'norm', it is notable that one trainee teacher, whose first degree was in 'world music' and whose principal instrumental skills were on guitar and tabla, was the one most frequently observed (throughout his training year) incorporating aspects of non-Western music into lessons – perhaps one example that explicitly illustrates the effect of teacher biography on teaching practice. Further, there is the example of the trainee teacher whose own background in popular music and with a rather inconsistent personal educational experience, founded strongly on peer-to-peer learning and self-determination, was observed to be using informal learning approaches in the classroom with some confidence (eg teaching and learning based on the 'Musical Futures' approach; <http://www.musicalfutures.org>).

As a result of the first two points above, other teachers can be challenged to be able to model or guide their pupils in some aspects of the curriculum. This can be detected in the composing lesson, which lacked guidance on the composing process mentioned a little earlier, and in the keyboard-based performing lesson given by a teacher trainee who was a principal woodwind player and had little keyboard expertise himself. In another teacher, though, this 'challenge' seemed to act as a spur to personal development. This trainee, from a largely 'classical' music background, felt unconfident in the use of technology in music education. However, on finding herself in a school

where the use of ICT was a major feature, especially in composing, she worked at developing her skill, eventually producing a 'model' of the ICT-based musical task for her students to emulate. So, in some cases, biography would seem to be limiting in assisting teachers to develop musicianship in their pupils and, in others, it would seem to act as inspiration to further personal growth in order to more effectively support pupils.

As Ofsted (2009, 2012) themselves have reported, there is little opportunity for subject-based development courses or modules either during Initial Teacher Education (ITE) (there's just not enough time within a ten-month PGCE course (Durrant & Laurence 2010)) or during employment where any continuing professional development (CPD) is frequently focused more on school-wide issues, such as literacy development or raising achievement (Ofsted 2012).

Finally, the needs and policies of a school will frequently override the needs of an individual curriculum area. There seems to be little acknowledgement that not all subjects are most effectively taught or learned in the same way. An example of this can be found in the trainee teacher, described in the previous section, who devoted significant portions of the observed lesson to pupils' target setting and review, with the guidance of her placement mentor, and where musical engagement was limited to approximately 40% of the total lesson time.

THE MUSICIAN-TEACHER IDENTITY

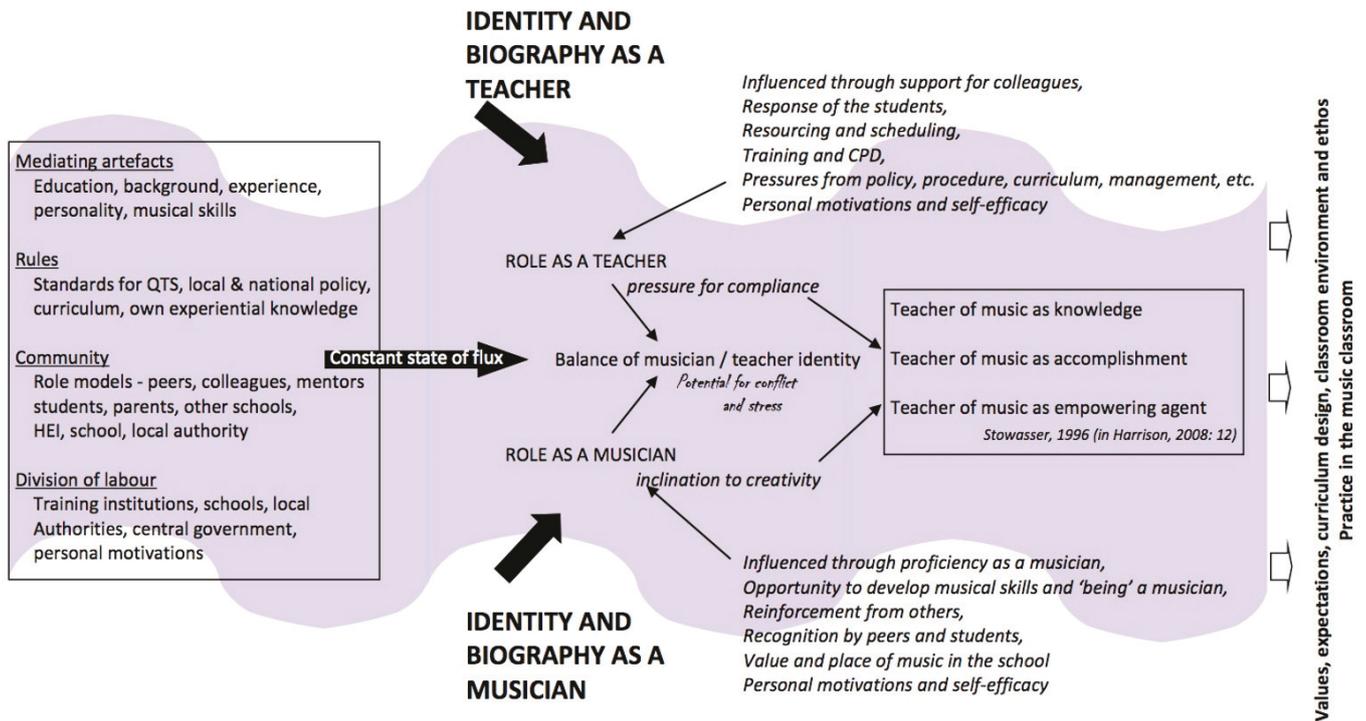
In developing an understanding of the role of biography in the development of the teacher role and identity, and based largely on literature pertaining to the subject, it has been possible to draw up a framework for 'developing music teacher identity'. In this framework, the self-image that begins to take shape in early life begins to impact upon musical identity as music becomes an increasingly significant factor in one's development,

and this, in turn, together with a range of other 'forces' such as local and national policy and ITE, impacts the formation of the music teacher identity. Following the research study, it has been possible to return to this framework, focusing more on what has been termed the musician-teacher, and a new, research-based, model has been designed which both extends and clarifies the former framework (Figure 1).

In this framework, the various influences upon the development of the individual and unique musician-teacher identity can be noted in the box towards the left of the model: eg education, background, training, Teacher Standards, role models, the school, and so on. All of these are in a constant state of flux and are impacted differently at different times by the individual's separate identities as musician and as teacher. There can be contradictions and conflicts here as sometimes one's identity as a musician has to be compromised by the needs and interests of schools, parents and, above all, pupils. This became evident quite clearly in the research where some participants stated that they had lost some of their sense of identity as a musician as the identity as a teacher 'took over' and subsumed it. One experienced music teacher, for example, stated that 'the longer I teach, the more difficult it is to be a musician'. These potential conflicts and contradictions can then impact on the 'type' of teacher one ultimately becomes. Stowasser (1996) defines these types as (1) the teacher of music as knowledge, (2) the teacher of music as an accomplishment and (3) the teacher of music as an empowering agent (Stowasser 1996 in Harrison 2008). It is interesting to conjecture at this point how far this may or may not be true for other curricular areas as well, in transposing the word 'music' for (say) geography or maths or science.

FIGURE 1

A framework for the developing musician–teacher identity



IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The study has suggested a wide range of potential implications for a range of ‘stakeholders’ in the music education of the young, including for teachers, universities and conservatoires, ITE, school managers and government policy. A brief selection of some of these implications can be summed up as:

- There is the question raised as to whether ITE courses are long enough. ITE in England is the shortest in Europe, at 3–5 years including undergraduate studies. In Germany, this is 6+ years, in France 5–6 years and in Spain 5–7 years (Sargeant et al. 2013). As a result, in music at least, it is difficult to spend any concentrated time on broadening subject knowledge to cover aspects not included in the increasingly specialised musical training of the prospective teachers;
- Wrapped up with this, it used to be the case that it was possible for potential teacher applicants to undertake subject enhancement

and booster courses prior to starting ITE, but funding for these has now been withdrawn for all except those deemed to be ‘priority’ subjects. There is a need, perhaps, for providers of ITE to reinstate these, even if student self-funded;

- A focus on musician–teacher biography needs to be considered as part of ITE and the manner in which this impacts values, identity and practice. Trainees should be given the opportunity to reflect on their background and training, evaluating how far it might create bias in teaching approaches, how far musician identity may need to be compromised in order to meet the needs and interests of pupils, and how far we consider it our role as teachers to seek to develop musicians or simply to present a range of musical activities with the hope that, for some, it might be the start of the journey towards musicianship;
- Subject-based CPD (beyond standardisation meetings to serve the needs of examinations) should be developed and schools should

be funded for and facilitating their teachers to take advantage of it. Ofsted (2012) has commented on the professional isolation of many music teachers working within small departments, so it would perhaps be appropriate to make a special case for music teachers to have access to good-quality subject-based CPD, including access to other support agencies such as subject associations;

- Senior Management Teams (SMTs) of schools should pay more consideration to balance of knowledge, skill and expertise of teachers within music departments so that, for example, one member of a department who is a strong performer is balanced by another who is a strong composer. This will also require creativity in timetabling so that pupils can receive ‘the best’ of each member of the music staff;
- Schools and SMTs need to recognise that not all subjects ‘work’ in the same way and that policies and routines set up within a school are flexible enough to be able to take account of the different approaches and

needs of each curriculum area. For example, evidence of pupil progress need not always be recognised in the written contents of an exercise book.

Brofenbrenner (1979) argues that we are all products of our biography. If this is the case – and the research described here would suggest that it is – then it is important that teachers, schools, leadership teams, and local and national authorities should recognise and rejoice in the individuality this brings to our

young people and their education, and that homogeneity in education is not necessarily a good thing. Innovation should be central to teaching and learning in music (and, indeed, in all subjects) but music teachers themselves also need to recognise the limitations imposed and opportunities made possible by their unique biographies and be aware of the way in which this can impact positively or negatively on their pupils' development as musicians. ■

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