Music teacher biography and its impact on teaching practice

Dr Christopher Dalladay

Abstract

This paper describes research carried out as part of a wider doctoral study on 'the biography of music teachers, their understanding of musicality and the implications for secondary music education'. Music teachers will come from a range of diverse backgrounds, though research data would suggest that most seem to have been educated as 'classical' music performers which will have an affect on what they perceive to be central competencies in the development of young musicians. In turn, this will determine, to some extent, what is taught and learned in the secondary music classroom. This study explores the impact of the biography of secondary music teachers as they seek to develop the musicianship of their pupils and present the activities in which the young people will be expected to participate. A mixed methods approach has been taken, including surveys, observation and interviews. Surveys amongst a sample of experienced and trainee teachers have produced a range of quantitative data on respondents' experience of and values related to music education; whilst qualitative data in the form of lesson observation notes and transcription of semi-structured interviews have been the result of working with a small sub-set of participants. The outcomes of study have suggested a clear link between biography and classroom practice but that there are also other potential tensions which arise, such as in the subject knowledge development of practitioners as they move from musician to teacher. Implications for a variety of stakeholders in secondary music education include a consideration of the development of subject knowledge together with potential review of national and local education policy, the nature of undergraduate music study and the 'shape' of initial teacher training in England.

Introduction: 'setting the scene'

We can all be considered products of our biography as who we are is a result of the life-histories that we each possess, with all the cultural, experiential and relational aspects that contribute to them (Brofenbrenner, 1979; Woods, 1984; Welch, 2012). In addition, whilst there is little that one can do to alter our life-histories, we can be agents in recognizing and, if necessary, changing our biographies as they are formed and recognizing how far the experiences of the past need to impinge on the activity of the now and future (Tudge *et al*, 2009, discussing the work of Brofenbrenner). An important part of biography is that of identity: biography being the 'historical counterpart' of identity, and identity is shaped by our life-histories (DeNora, 2000; Harrison, 2008). Kidd and Teagle (2012) go further by arguing that we can mould our identities and that this can shape our future lives (Kidd & Teagle, 2012: 78). It can further be argued that, for a teacher, there is a clear relationship between biography and identity, and classroom practice; that the former impacts and shapes the latter (Dalladay, 2014). The study described in this paper seeks to explore the possible impact a teacher's biography has on their practice in the classroom. Music teachers in England would seem to come from a quite limited range of the musical population as a whole with backgrounds principally as white, Western classical music performers and/or singers, going into teaching straight after studying for a degree, and whose education in music has come more from private tuition,

extra curricular activities, and music services rather than from in-class school music education (York, 2001; Rogers, 2002; Welch *et al*, 2011). It is possible to discern from this how 'conservative' and academic many music teachers' development as musicians is likely to have been and that this can potentially pose difficulties in the classroom where the musical interests and experiences of young people are frequently more contemporary and less formalised (Dalladay, 2011; Macdonald *et al*, 2002). It is the hypothesis at the centre of this study that this may affect the content, delivery and attitude of teachers in schools and their overall understanding of the development of musicianship in young people which may well be part of the reason for the continuing criticism of pupil progress noted frequently by official bodies such as Ofsted (2009; 2012).

Research methods

As an initial stage in developing the research described in this paper, a series of twelve competencies required for the development of musicians was drawn up along with a further twelve contexts within which musicians develop. These were determined through debate with music teacher trainees entering on teacher training courses and through a study of the related literature (e.g. Hargreaves *et al*, 2002; MENC, 1994; Swanwick & Tillman, 1986; Pflederer, 1963; DfE, 2013; Hallam, 2006; Green, 2002). The musical competencies include the ability to (1) perform on a musical instrument, (2) develop compositions, (3) improvise, (4) use musical terminology appropriately, (5) read from staff notation, (6) sing, (7) use ICT to develop musical 'events', (8) perform by ear, (9) harmonize melodies, (10) have a general knowledge of a range of musics, (11) relate to the expressive content of music, and (12) aurally analyse relationships between sounds. The learning contexts include (1) from a teacher, (2) through performing with others, (3) stimulated by role models and musicians we admire, (4) from family and/or friends, (5) through regular practice, (6) by being a teacher to others, (7) through devising our own music, (8) through attending live musical performances, (9) through academic musical studies (gaining qualifications), (10) through listening to recorded music, (11) through performing to an audience, and (12) through jamming/improvising with others by ear.

The research question of the study was 'is there any relationship between what is taught in class music and a music teacher's biography?' The research involved a mixed-methods approach with a range of data sources:

1. An exploration with teachers and trainees of the competencies for developing musicians and the contexts in which musicians develop with the resultant 'lists' described above;

2. The prioritisation/ranking of the competencies and contexts for importance according to personal values by participants (n=39, the 'sorting activity' participant group - SPG); these activities have been termed the 'sorting' activities;

3. A more general exploration of views on musicianship, music education (including one's own education and background) and personal philosophies on the place of music through a survey (n=64);

4. In-depth exploration of 'practice' through observation of teaching, using a unique observation 'tool' (n=11, the core participant group - CPG). The observation tool allowed for notes to be made by the observer and a timeline to be created on how far various aspects were evident. In addition, during observations, each competency was given an 'observed significance score' (OSS) where a score of 1 was awarded if the competency/context was evident in the lesson but not a major feature (e.g. short or cursory). A score of 2 was awarded where the competency/context was evident and with a degree of significance (e.g. singing

takes place but with little emphasis on improvement), and a 3 awarded where it was strongly evident in the lessons.

5. Semi-structured nterviews to explore the relationship between life history/musical development and practice observed in the classroom (n=10, selected from the observed group above). Interviews were recorded on audio with semi-transcriptions being made with time-coding for ease of location within the recording.

The participants have principally included Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and Graduate Training Programme (GTP) teacher trainees from a London Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provider, together with their music teacher-mentors within practice placement schools from the provider's secondary ITE partnership.

An exploration of the participants' understanding of musicality and the extent to which musicianship was being developed in the classroom became a central element within the research study. Other studies would suggest that personal biography can impact on values and, in particular, on the priorities of music education (e.g. performing, reading notation) (Burnard, 2011; Spruce, 2012; Georgii-Hemming, 2011).

Research findings and discussion

The mean rankings of the musical competencies and the learning contexts of the 'Sorting Participant Group' (SPG) have been compared with the observed significance rankings of each of the same competencies and contexts in teaching observation of the 'Core Participant Group' (CPG). The results of this comparison can be seen in table 1. Of note when considering the data at table 1, for example, is the case of 'the use of ICT to develop and enhance musical events': the SPG placed this musical competency in the lowest position, yet, in teaching and learning in practice amongst the CPG, it would seem to take on much more significance – 4th position (though, with quite a low mean 'observed significance score' (OSS) of 1.0). Again, there is a difference in the place of singing, with

Musical competences	Sorting Activity mean rank (T3R%)	Sorting Activity overall ranking	OSS ranking (mean OSS /3)	Learning contexts	Sorting Activity mean rank (T3R%)	Sorting Activity overall ranking	OSS ranking (mean OSS /3)
Performing on an instrument	3.21 (64)	1	1 (2.0)	Performing with others	4.28 (39)	1	2 (1.5)
Performing 'by ear'	3.97 (46)	2	2 (1.5)	Regular music practice	4.36 (44)	2	7 (0.8)
Singing with accurate intonation	4.23 (56)	3	7 (0.5)	A teacher (class or instrument)	4.38 (51)	3	1 (2.6)
Aural analysis between sounds	4.52 (56)	4	7 (0.5)	Listening to recorded music	5.31 (36)	4	5 (0.9)
Composing	4.67 (36)	5	6 (0.7)	Role models / musicians I admire	5.54 (28)	5	3 (1.4)
Improvising	5.05 (33)	6	9 (0.4)	Family and/or friends	5.59 (39)	6	4 (1.0)
General knowledge of range of musics	5.69 (39)	7	3 (1.1)	Performing to an audience	5.67 (26)	7	5 (0.9)
Relate to expressive content	6.15 (33)	8	11 (0.1)	Attending live musical perfs.	5.92 (26)	8	8 (0.5)
Reading from staff notation	6.67 (13)	9	9 (0.4)	Being a teacher to others	7.03 (15)	9	11 (0.3)
Use of musical terminology	7.46 (21)	10	5 (0.9)	Jamming / improvising	7.12 (15)	10	11 (0.3)
Harmonization of melodies	8.03 (8)	11	12 (0.0)	Composing	7.18 (18)	11	10 (0.7)
Use of ICT to develop music	8.10 (10)	12	4 (1.0)	Academic musical studies	7.87 (18)	12	8 (0.5)

Table 1
A comparison of the perceived importance of musical competencies and learning contexts with
observed significance scores (OSS) in class music lessons (1=High, 12=low);
also showing the percentage of participants placing aspects in the top 3 ranking positions (T3R%) and the relative mean OSS (max.3).
[The relative mean in this study has been taken as an average across all lessons observed, where 'null' OSSs are counted a zero.]

most participants regarding this as an important musical competency (3rd in ranking with 56% of participants ranking the activity in the top 3 positions), yet comparatively little singing was observed in lessons – ranked in 7th position and with an OSS of 0.5. Performing on a musical instrument is consistently ranked in 1st position in terms of both personal values and observed significance, though it is, perhaps, notable that in most observed lessons, performing was restricted to the electric keyboard but that aspects of keyboard performance technique (e.g. fingering, phrasing) were rarely observed being covered; hence a mean OSS of just 2.0.

Other data from this research study would suggest that, in some cases, there does seem to be a clear link between the results presented in table 1 and teacher biography. The data to support this assertion largely comes from post-observation interviews with the CPG but also, to a lesser extent, from survey data. This is particularly the case (in the examples above) for singing and performing, and even the position of composing, but less the case for ICT for which other reasons may be likely for the discrepancy between value and practice (e.g. the desire to make use of equipment in which a large amount of investment has been made). The vast majority of the trainees' and teachers' participant group (n=55) come from a background in which instrumental performance has been a significant part of their training as musicians. 100% of the participants have had some training on a musical instrument and/or the voice with 57% as 1st or 2nd study pianists and 45% as vocalists (20% as 2nd study only within the CPG). 64% of the sample attained at least Grade 8 on their instrument (from, for example, the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music) and 78% started to learn their instrument before the age of 12. This data would tend to corroborate that of previous studies (e.g. York, 2001; Rogers, 2002). In contrast to these findings, 45% of the sample acknowledge that they have composed music for amateur or professional public use with fewer positive responses from Western classically trained musicians than other-than-classically trained musicians (50% by number within each group in the CPG) by a factor of nearly 1:2.

Focusing on the Core Participant Group who had been observed and interviewed, most had taken a traditional music / music performance first degree though one had a degree related to 'world' music and another did not have a degree related to music at all. Half were from a classical music background and the rest from a contemporary popular music background. Many of the group talk of having picked up musical instruments at quite a young age with other members of the family acting as a catalyst and then playing in school and local music service groups throughout primary and secondary school ages. Some have developed a profile which has included performing in community music groups such as brass bands and some continue to do so. Several speak rather disparagingly of their secondary school 'standard' music-class education (50%) though all have participated in a selection of extra-curricular musical activities at school. There was a more positive response, however, in the survey to the question, "I usually enjoyed music lessons in key stage 3 when a pupil at school" (60% strongly agreeing) than to the question, "My secondary school music teachers were very good at helping less musical pupils to develop" (20%). In terms of influence from families, all but one participant attested to family members being musicians or being a strongly influential figure in their musical development.

It is, perhaps, worth noting at this point that those participants who had 'dabbled' most widely in musical genres and traditions in their development (30%), would seem to have a more 'open' and less 'traditional' approach to music education. One, for example, who had experienced periods of non-attendance whilst at secondary school and

differences with teachers, some family support issues and long periods of music-making with peers disconnected from education and family circles completely, had in observation a highly creative, practical approach in which student views were important and music making came alive for them by introducing activities which they found relevant and motivating. Again, another participant, with a background in an eclectic mix of popular, folk and world musics, wanted the students in his classes to enjoy the social aspects of music-making through developing group as well as individual, improvisation and performing activities based on traditions such as West African drumming and with an interest in developing inclusivity and authenticity.

During the course of this study, five aspects related to the effectiveness of secondary music teachers have suggested themselves: (1) the subject knowledge of the teachers, (2) their understanding of musicality, (3) processes and practices prevalent in individual schools, (4) curricular issues, and (5) teachers themselves understanding the impact of their own biographies on classroom delivery and lesson content. Looking at some of the life-histories of teachers can have a profound impact on what we and they can understand of their own interaction with music and their students (Pitts, 2012; Barrett & Stauffer, 2012). It has also become evident that those who have grown up with music from an early age (especially as Western classical musicians) can tend to have a 'narrower' view of what a musician looks like. This is evidenced, for example, in the participant who comes from a very musical home (mother is a music teacher) who entered her teacher training year with a 'narrow-minded' (her words) image, though her view of musicianship has changed over the year. This contrasts with another participant, not from a particularly musical home, who has a broad image of a musician, supporting all his students to reach their full potential including using ICT to support those who do not play an instrument.

Perhaps, one of the most significant aspects to come out of this study has been that of the subject knowledge of the music teacher: 'classical' musicians who struggle to include more contemporary styles within their teaching or ICT in a musical way; a non-keyboard player (a woodwind specialist) who struggles to support pupils working on electric keyboards in lessons; music technology or contemporary musicians who find it a challenge to support pupils in musical theory and score reading. However, the routines and practices of schools can also be problematic when teaching music. Data from this research has suggested that, on average, just 57% of lesson time is devoted to teaching and learning related to any one or more of the musical competencies with much of the rest of the time being taken up with practices such as setting and reviewing targets, ensuring that exercise books have notes in them and issues such as behaviour management.

Figure 1 shows a framework for the development of the music teacher identity which has been suggested by this current research study and which might form a point of consideration when planning for the training of music teachers and their continuing professional development, as well as act as a vehicle to stimulate reflection by teachers themselves.
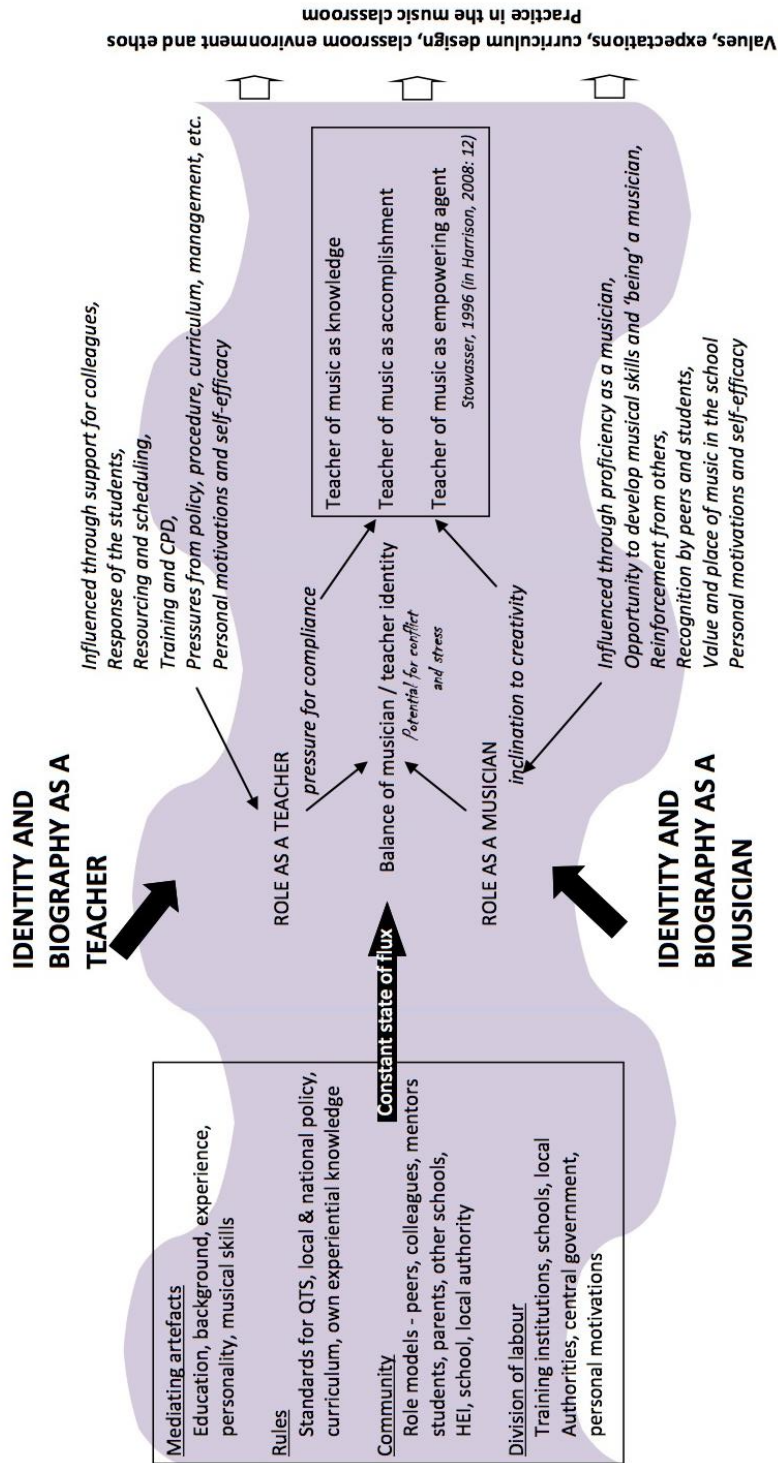
A MODEL OF THE MUSICIAN-TEACHER IDENTITY

Values, expectations, curriculum design, classroom environment and ethos
Practice in the music classroom

IDENTITY AND BIOGRAPHY AS A TEACHER

ROLE AS A TEACHER

pressure for compliance

Balance of musician / teacher identity
Potential for conflict and stress

ROLE AS A MUSICIAN

inclination to creativity

Constant state of flux

Influenced through support for colleagues,
Response of the students,
Resourcing and scheduling,
Training and CPD,
Pressures from policy, procedure, curriculum, management, etc.
Personal motivations and self-efficacy

Teacher of music as knowledge

Teacher of music as accomplishment

Teacher of music as empowering agent

Stowasser, 1996 (in Harrison, 2008: 12)

Influenced through proficiency as a musician,
Opportunity to develop musical skills and 'being' a musician,
Reinforcement from others,
Recognition by peers and students,
Value and place of music in the school
Personal motivations and self-efficacy

IDENTITY AND BIOGRAPHY AS A MUSICIAN

Mediating artefacts
Education, background, experience, personality, musical skills

Rules
Standards for QTS, local & national policy, curriculum, own experiential knowledge

Community
Role models - peers, colleagues, mentors students, parents, other schools, HEI, school, local authority

Division of labour
Training institutions, schools, local Authorities, central government, personal motivations

TIME

Figure 1
A model of the developing musician-teacher identity

Implications

There are a wide range of implications for an equally wide range of 'stakeholders': teachers, universities and conservatoires, initial teacher education, schools and their managers, government and other official bodies.

One of the most clearly demonstrated issues arising from the research has been that of the subject knowledge and skills of the music teachers themselves. Most teachers have come from a background centred on Western classical music and instrumental performance skills, yet the curriculum as laid out in the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) places considerable emphasis, for example, also on devising skills – composing and improvising. Activities related to the development of these skills are quite often observed in the classroom, yet the teachers do not always have the skills in composing to be able to teach it with confidence. For instance, one research participant, an experienced music teacher, set his pupils off on a composing task but without providing much guidance on the 'how' of composing. Even in developing performing-related activities, teachers can still be 'at a loss' as demonstrated by the participant described earlier who had no piano/keyboard skills struggling to support pupils in playing the electric keyboard. Universities, Conservatoires and ITE programmes, even employing schools themselves, need, perhaps, to pay greater regard to the broader skill-set required of music teachers than in some other musical professions. This may involve funding and time for continuing professional development (CPD), increased opportunities during ITE for subject knowledge development as well as pedagogical aspects, and timetabling and deployment of music teachers in schools.

Another important implication from this study would suggest that music teachers and those responsible for delivering ITE and CPD programmes need to pay greater regard to what teachers bring to the classroom in terms of biography, identity, values and understanding. Opportunity might be provided for those involved to reflect on these and how they might impact on, or offer bias to, the teaching and learning in their classrooms.

Thirdly and finally, the music curriculum in schools (and the preparation for teaching it in ITE programmes) may benefit from an increasing focus on musical competencies in the development of young peoples' musicianship. There is the view that our role as music teachers is to seek to develop musicians rather than present a range of music-related activities which simply give young people a 'taster' of the subject. More in-depth learning will frequently take place in extra-curricular activities, the instrumental/vocal lessons (which can be an additional financial burden to families and schools) and the work of music services and community music groups – all of which can play an important role, but which can also promote exclusivity rather than inclusivity (Wright, 2012).

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