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# Judging Quality and Fostering Excellence in Music Teaching

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**Janet R. Barrett<sup>1</sup>**

Quality in music teaching is a complex and sophisticated notion not easily captured by platitudes and checklists. As I sample recent studies, reports, policy statements, and posts related to teacher evaluation, it strikes me that much current dialogue about teacher quality seems to lack depth and dimension, focusing mainly on two narrow bands: teachers' observable behaviors in the classroom and teachers' impact on students' test scores. Music teacher educators are keenly interested in quality, although our conversations often center on a related yet even more complex, and perhaps more idiosyncratic, concept of teacher excellence. It is our mission to foster and facilitate foundations of excellence in the beliefs and practices of preservice teachers. It is also our mission to recognize and support the growth and refinement of excellence for teachers in the field. Obviously, the impact and coherence of teacher education and professional development programs are also being challenged in these calls for reform. Thus, we are compelled to participate in these debates and must respond with clarity and discernment.

Quality in music teaching takes many different forms and shapes. As with any generalization about human behavior, we expect high-quality teaching to be as multidimensional as any other complex undertaking. Consider the panoramic array of music teachers with whom we work over the course of our careers. Teacher educators are fortunate to travel in many circles where we interact with preservice and inservice music teachers in many phases of development, in diverse settings and communities, and across a broad array of activities that constitute the impressive range of their professional responsibilities. We often glimpse music teachers in their most vital moments, connecting the expressive powers of music to students' experience in immediate, tangible, and affirming ways. It is a privilege to witness varied forms of excellence in our field. Striving for excellence in our own work and responsively supporting the quest for excellence in others' work is at the heart of teacher education.

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How do teachers come to be regarded as excellent? Taking a more naturalistic perspective, I often imagine that vibrant teachers I have seen possess an internal compass of beliefs that guide their work with students. By keeping aims in view (a Deweyan notion), they responsively move forth in action toward these valued goals, such as a deep desire to facilitate students' musical understanding, to build a sense of community in the music room, to foster individual identities within music, to exemplify integrity and equity, and to pursue transcendent moments through the expressive medium of music. Such teachers also demonstrate their strategic coordination of aspects of the learning environment, intelligence in organizing the curriculum, creativity in shaping students' experience, personal musicianship, and artistry in the way they pull the components of their music programs together. They use professional judgment to shape a vibrant, educationally sound, and respectful learning community, and passionately defend their decisions when questioned. I have also noticed a restlessness that often runs under the surface in that excellent teachers are often focused on the next work or project or innovation they are enthused to tackle. They have a "reform-mindedness" about their *own* work, striving toward continual improvement and refinement.

I am reminded of an important distinction made by Gary Fenstermacher and Virginia Richardson in their thoughtful article for the Board of International Comparative Studies, National Academy of Science, "On Making Determinations of Quality in Teaching" (2005). They distinguish between *successful* teaching, in which students learn what they are taught (an achievement dimension), from *good* teaching, that which "accords with high standards and methods of practice . . . and that comports with morally defensible and rationally sound principles of instructional practice" (a task dimension) (p. 189). In careful fashion, Fenstermacher and Richardson untangle conceptual, empirical, and normative notions of quality teaching, tracing them through emphases in teacher education on process-product research, cognitive science, and constructivist approaches. With considerable discernment, they also address three important conditions for learning that impact quality of teaching: learner willingness and effort, supportive social surround, and sufficient opportunities to learn. Their exposition of quality teaching highlights many issues that seem to be lacking or underdeveloped in policy dialogue: the moral dimensions of teachers' work, the mutuality of teaching and learning, the contextual conditions that constrain teachers and sometimes provoke them to respond, the methodological complexities of measuring and judging quality, and the ways that prevalent belief systems skew our conceptions of quality teaching toward certain dimensions over others.

These omissions are foremost in our minds as we witness current debates about reform initiatives that address high-quality teachers, teacher evaluation, and value-added schemes for determining teacher retention, remediation, and rewards. Many schemes operationalize quality in some way as a proxy for excellence. The quest for high-quality teachers has been on the radar for some time, but the conversation is shifting rapidly from defining quality as a matter of teachers' credentials to a definition of quality that is tightly coupled with student achievement. The phrase, "value-added," refers to statistical modeling that seeks to attribute gains in student achievement to teacher factors. Fueled by the administration's Race to the Top, a torrent of state initiatives has been unleashed related

to value-added modeling; these are churning ahead at breakneck pace. Fenstermacher and Richardson (2005) question prevalent assumptions that “the improvement of teaching is a key element in improving student learning” if these assumptions also treat teaching as a straightforward causal determinant, “such that if it could be perfected, it could then be sustained under almost any conditions, including poverty, vast linguistic, racial, or cultural differences, and massive differences in the opportunity factors of time, facilities, and resources” (p. 191).

## Avenues for Inquiry

The Society for Music Teacher Education (SMTE) must address these policy initiatives and provide any guidance and collective expertise we can offer. In my last column, I suggested that it takes a village to sort through the disparate proposals and claims of educational reform that have direct impact on music teachers’ identities, roles, responsibilities, and accomplishments. As I write this column before the Greensboro Symposium in September, I hope that by the time it is published that our village will have organized more strategically to maximize our collective influence. As you may know, parallel groups and agencies are simultaneously targeting the development of music assessments, a cornerstone of the “value-added” enterprise, but in my judgment, SMTE is best focused on issues most directly related to teacher evaluation and teacher education.

SMTE can take leadership in providing *critical analyses of policies related to teacher evaluation and their implementation*. In particular, we need to question intended outcomes and probe their unintended consequences. Among many scholarly critiques, I think of Apple’s (2010) observation that these reform emphases are indicative of a “resurgent managerialism that insists that if it moves in classrooms it must be measured” (p. 696). The very metaphor of Race to the Top seems to preclude careful deliberation. School reform is couched in competitive and fast-paced metaphors—winning, racing, outcomes, outperforming, and so on. The relevant reform plank focuses on “reforming and improving teacher preparation; revising teacher evaluation, compensation, and retention policies to encourage and reward effectiveness” (White House, 2009).

Student achievement is the focal point of value-added models for teacher evaluation. Even the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has launched a study of teacher impact that includes randomly assigning students to teachers, acknowledges that reliance on student scores alone places most subject areas outside of reading and math at a distinct disadvantage:

Not all subjects and grades currently have mandated tests. As a result, if teacher effectiveness measures were limited to a score based on teachers’ contributions to student performance on standardized tests, the feedback would exclude the majority of teachers—all of whom have an important role in student learning. The issue could be resolved by additional tests, but tests are resource- and time-intensive (for both students and teachers) and are highly variable in quality. (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010, p. 5)

Yet, at the time of writing, my inbox confirms that in some states, in the absence of student achievement data in music and/or discipline-specific observation protocols, music teacher evaluations are being tied to students' scores in math and reading/language arts. Yes, read that again, it is not a misprint.

Even in subject areas that use reliable and valid standardized tests, value-added scores are not always consistent with more "naturalistic" observations of teacher quality. One such study compared math teachers' value-added scores with measures of their mathematical knowledge (Hill, Kapitula, & Umland, 2011). The researchers also conducted case studies of these math teachers that uncovered instances in which teachers whose value-added scores were high did not exhibit good instructional practices during observations of their classrooms.

Of great concern to undergraduate preparation are proposals that intend to index value-added achievement gains to the institution where the teacher was prepared. The goal is to provide some sort of rating of quality by teacher preparation institution. Diez (2010) traces the complicated path researchers need to follow to establish the impact of teacher graduates from a particular institution on student learning, which is dependent on three loci of impact: when evaluating candidates of a teacher education program, "Did they learn what we taught them?" and two questions for evaluating graduates of a program: "Are they doing what they learned?" and "Is what they're doing resulting in student learning?" Three sets of relationships:

need to be examined and unpacked to both know *that the program*—and not other factors—affected student learning and also shed light on *how the program* affected that learning . . . the impact of the teacher education program on the candidate's knowledge, skills, and dispositions; the impact of the teacher's knowledge, skills, and dispositions on her or his practice in the classroom; and the impact of the teacher's practice on P-12 student learning. (Diez, 2010, p. 442)

Music teachers' professional development is also implicated. Hourigan (2011) analyzes current policy, speculating on a "worst case scenario" (p. 63) under Race to the Top in which music teachers' venues for professional development would be severely curtailed, and their efforts at professional betterment derailed if they failed to follow district-targeted mandates to improve test scores.

SMTE can lead in the *search for more flexible, fair, and fitting systems for music teacher evaluation*. We have tradition, research studies, plentiful descriptions of teacher knowledge and accreditation standards, and a growing body of literature to draw on. In a recent address, Colwell reviewed historical foci on teacher personality, competencies, teacher knowledge, accreditation, and performance evaluation related to music teachers, as well as dissertation studies that might be used as a foundation for more discipline-specific protocols, rubrics, and criteria (Colwell, 2010). Of particular note is Colwell's observation that local teacher education evaluation processes often

fail to distinguish *merit* (the quantity and quality of work) from *worth* (the value of the employee to the institution).

Several states appear to be modeling their evaluation systems on the work of Danielson (2007, 2008), who has developed systematic guidelines for teacher observation and the critical review of artifacts related to teaching. Here, we need to understand how general models for teacher evaluation are adapted to reflect the discipline-specific characteristics of music teachers' work. A related area for inquiry is how administrators or evaluators who conduct the reviews and who may not understand the nature of music classrooms interpret these generic systems in a way that befits music teaching and learning.

The use of music teacher evaluations warrants careful scrutiny. Will these systems serve as formative assessments to assist teachers in their development; as summative judgments for decisions about teacher retention and merit; as a means to foster more responsive professional development; to remediate teacher quality in instances where teacher preparation has been inadequate, or for termination decisions in cases where individuals fall short of standards and expectations? How do we reconcile fluid and individualized concepts of excellence with proposals to govern, measure, and operationalize "teacher quality?" What wise courses of action concerning teacher evaluation align more comfortably with music teachers than others? Any proposal for teacher quality is likely to fail if it is too uniform in its concept and implementation, unresponsive to local contexts or the disciplinary nature of subject matters and specializations.

SMTE can also provide evidence of *the impact of these teacher evaluation systems on music teachers*. Just as we have seen the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act on the music curriculum, we need to determine how teacher evaluation influences music teacher satisfaction, recruitment, retention, professional learning, identity, mentoring, and a host of other factors. I am unaware of any research studies in progress to address this impact, but this is an opportune time for mounting these. By serving as a resource to state and national agencies and associations committed to quality music teaching, we can identify pressing areas for policy studies on teacher evaluation. Through systematic inquiry, we can assist in defining multiple methods of teacher evaluation that are more naturalistic, more discipline specific, and more sensitive to images of teachers as professionals.

## Alignment and Action

The organizational structure of the society is a great asset as we identify avenues for concentrated action related to teacher evaluation. What follows is a preliminary list of some ideas to consider. These starting points may trigger deliberation toward even more productive courses for SMTE to follow. For example, the society may contribute by:

- Developing a new section on the SMTE website to address the discipline-specific nature of teacher quality in music. This site could be used as a

resource for state personnel, policy makers, leaders of state music educators associations, and teacher educators.

- Forming an advisory panel that would be available for consultation.
- Establishing a clearinghouse to highlight cases of reasonable and principled implementation of teacher quality initiatives.
- Sponsoring listening sessions at state conferences to gather information about how teacher evaluation practices are being implemented at the local level.
- Generating a coordinated plan for research studies to determine the impact of evaluation policies on music teachers.
- Establishing a new Area of Strategic Planning and Action (ASPA) or facilitating cross-ASPA team efforts to tackle the complex and far-ranging challenges of music teacher evaluation.

A society dedicated to the cultivation of programs for excellence in music teacher education, development, and professional growth is well poised to contribute to this pressing dialogue on policies and practices related to teacher quality.

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