

Perceptions of Experienced Music Teachers Regarding Their Work as Music Mentors

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The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of experienced music teachers regarding their preparation for and experience of mentoring in a 2-year mentor project focusing on the support of teachers in Title I schools in Orlando, Florida. Data included the following: initial expectations of mentoring from Year 1 (note cards), biggest challenges from Year 2 (note cards), mentor development session interactions from Years 1 and 2, interviews with mentors at the end of the study period, and research logs from the two researchers. Findings suggest that mentors need mentors; time management is a challenge for mentors; communication with the mentee is a challenge; observations of the mentees are necessary but difficult; technology can be a positive resource for mentor and mentee interaction; and mentors struggle to keep mentee interactions in the realm of support and not evaluation.

Keywords: *mentoring; professional development*

Recent educational policy initiatives, as well as continued concerns regarding teacher retention and the teacher shortage, have led to increased attention to mentoring as a support system for music teachers (Conway, Krueger, Robinson, Haack, & Smith, 2002). Conway (2003a) examined the mentor experiences of beginning music teachers and concluded that the needs of music teachers are specific to music and that generic mentor programs have difficulty meeting the needs of beginning music teachers:

It may be that school districts can not provide for the music-specific needs of the beginning music teacher. Programs designed and implemented by state music organizations may be the answer to providing content support. However, these programs should be designed based on research on beginning teachers and not just on the wisdom of leaders of state music organizations. (p. 21)

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Many state music organizations and other local music groups are working to provide mentor programs for music teachers (Conway, 2003b). Past research suggests that music mentors who are prepared for their role as mentors are perceived by mentees as being more valuable than mentors who are not provided with training (Conway, 2003a; Smith, 2003). However, there is no published research within music education in the area of mentor development and preparation for music mentoring.

Researchers in teacher education have begun to examine the preparation of mentors for work with beginning teachers (Davis, 2006). Achinstein and Athanases (2006) present a view of a mentor as a learner and inquirer:

A new conception of teacher [the mentee] as learner also requires a new conception of mentor as learner. We know that many induction programs select mentors on the basis of their being lead teachers, veteran teachers of some distinction, or teachers of greatest seniority (e.g., Porter, Youngs, & Odden, 2001). Although they have distinguished themselves in their classrooms, assuming these good teachers make good mentors of new teachers is problematic. Making mentors needs to be cast as a deliberate act that rests on a knowledge base for effective mentoring. . . . Thus mentors are not born, but made, and are in a continuing process of becoming. (pp. 9-10)

This concept, that mentors are made, forms the conceptual framework for our study. Because there is no published research within music education on music mentors, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of experienced music teachers regarding their preparation for and experience of mentoring in a 2-year mentor project focusing on the support of teachers in Title I schools in Orlando, Florida. Research questions for this inquiry included the following: How do mentors discuss their preparation for and experience of mentoring? What are mentors' reactions to various mentor development activities? What suggestions do music mentors have regarding their preparation for work as music mentors?

Description of Mentor Project

The mentor project was created as part of a federally funded professional development program for music teachers working in Title I schools where 75% or more of the students qualified for the free or reduced-price lunch program. The program was designed to address the needs of urban music teachers, who were teaching in schools with diverse student populations having a variety of learning needs and styles. The premise was that by engaging in a comprehensive program of seminars and assignments, reflective practice, collaboration, technology training, and mentoring, teachers would be better equipped to address the challenges of teaching a highly diverse and frequently large student population. Mentors were asked to provide support for two to five mentees in an assigned cohort group, through regular communication (phone calls, e-mail, meetings), and to assist the mentees in developing and demonstrating practices related to planning, teaching, assessing, and reflecting on music teaching.

During monthly seminars, mentors met with their mentee cohort groups to discuss classroom applications of seminar content, to address problems, and to organize planning meetings and classroom visits. Cohort groups met in their classrooms to observe and analyze teaching by mentors and mentees, discuss areas of concern, develop curriculum and assessment documents, and construct music teaching portfolios.

Method

In considering the mentor program as a case, we drew from case study methodology (Merriam, 1998), as well as from general principles of phenomenology in research. Within phenomenology, we approached this study from the lens of heuristic inquiry.

According to Patton (2002), "heuristics is a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings to the fore the personal experience and insights of the researcher" (p. 107). Heuristic researchers embrace the "depictions of essential meanings and portrayal of the intrigue and personal significance that imbue the search to know" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 43). Heuristics "affirms the possibility that one can live deeply and passionately in the moment, be fully immersed in mysteries and miracles, and still be engaged in meaningful research experience" (Craig, 1978, p. 20). We were involved with the participants as program coordinator and professional development provider (Holcomb) and mentor development presenter (Conway). A heuristic approach allowed for us to be involved with the study from the inside and so reflect on our perceptions as participants as well as researchers. During mentor development workshops, Conway worked as participant while Holcomb worked as the researcher taking field notes. We were conscious throughout data collection and analysis to attend to the emic (insider) perspectives of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006).

Participants/Sampling

The teacher participants ($N = 11$) and mentor program studied represent what Patton (2002) would call *critical case sampling*: "Critical cases are those that can make a point quite dramatically or are, for some reason, particularly important in the scheme of things" (p. 236). We considered this group a critical case because its members were all experienced music teachers who had been chosen by their district music coordinators as successful music teachers. They were involved in a federally funded mentor initiative that included mentor professional development as well as music teacher development experiences designed for mentees. The sense was that the profession could learn from this case.

The teacher participants included eight elementary general, two secondary instrumental, and one secondary choral music teacher. The eight teachers in the final interview group included one choral teacher and seven elementary-general music teachers. Teacher participants were considered co-researchers with us because we all worked to come to a shared understanding of the perceptions of these experienced music teachers regarding mentoring.

Time Line, Data Sources, and Procedures

Mentor note cards from Year 1 and Year 2. At the Year 1 mentor meeting, 11 mentors were asked to answer the following questions on index cards: What do you believe to be the characteristics of a good mentor? What do you think you have to offer as a mentor? and What will help you to help your mentees? Participant responses were collected, transcribed, and kept for use in planning the second-year workshop, as well as for use as data in the study. During the second mentor development session, 11 teachers responded to the prompt, "What are your biggest mentor challenges?" Responses to this question were transcribed and used as data.

Mentor development session interaction notes from Year 1 and Year 2. Holcomb made notes regarding participants' interactions at both of the development workshops and then used the notes as data. This represented primarily mentor-generated content that was put up on flip charts and transcribed for use in the study.

Interviews and researchers' logs. Eight of the music mentors were interviewed individually for approximately 40 min in May 2006. Because of schedule logistics, three mentors were unable to attend the interview. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Questions asked to everyone were as follows:

Tell me about your mentoring experiences over the past 2 years.

Tell me about your mentor program participation experiences over the past 2 years.

In what ways do you feel the mentor training most contributed to your success as a mentor; or, what where the most meaningful mentor development activities during the last 2 years? What suggestions do you have regarding your preparation for work as a music mentor and/or the preparation of future music teacher mentors?

The final data set was a log kept by each researcher. We made notes in our logs regarding study interactions and research question thoughts and wonderments throughout the 2-year project period. See Figure 1 for a time line of the procedures.

Figure 1
Time Line of Mentor Project

October 2004 – First mentor development session (Year I) September 2004 – 2005 – Participants working as mentors August 2005 – Second mentor development session (Year II) September 2005 – 2006 – Participants continuing to work as mentors May 2006 – Final participant interviews

Analysis, Trustworthiness, and Validity

Transcripts were made of all data sets. The three research questions guided the review of data, and comparisons were made between mentors to gather the

collective reactions of the mentor participants. Findings represent our collective understanding of the experiences of these mentors and their recommendations for mentor development.

The multiple data sets constitute data triangulation for this study. We compared comments from participants in the mentor development sessions to their responses in interviews and to the information in our researcher logs in an effort to describe accurately the mentor perceptions of their preparation for and experiences in mentoring. We searched across participants to capture experiences that were common to many of the mentors. Data analysis triangulation was also used as a strategy for validity given that we both conducted separate analyses previous to our shared analysis discussions. In heuristic inquiry, the expertise of the investigators is a primary component of validity. Both researchers had considerable previous experience in providing professional development for experienced teachers and in studying the effects of professional development on teacher learning. A final strategy for validity, as suggested by Merriam (1998), involves the length of the data collection period; in this study, data were collected over 2 years. This time allowed for findings to emerge and for us to involve the participants in the dialogue regarding themes and categories.

Findings and Discussion

The responses to the first research question (How do mentors discuss issues of the preparation for and experiences of mentoring?) and the second research question (What are mentor reactions to various mentor development activities?) are presented in the following categories: mentors need mentors; time management; challenge of communication with mentee; observations are important but difficult; technology can be a positive resource for mentor and mentee interaction; and support by mentors, not evaluation. The final section of the findings includes responses to the third research question (What suggestions do music mentors have regarding their preparation for work as a music mentor?).

Each category below includes a description of the finding, evidence from various data sets to support the finding, and a brief discussion of the finding. Although the results of this study may not be generalizable to all mentor programs (in the commonly understood use of the word *generalizability*), one may use logical situational generalizability (Schwartz, 1996) to transfer findings to other populations. If one can logically assume that participants in another population are in a situation similar to the one described in this study, it may be possible that results from this study are relevant in other contexts.

Mentors Need Mentors

All the mentors expressed the importance of mentor interaction in this program:

I did like the mentor interactions. We functioned as a support group for each other. I like that we shared strategies of how to interact with our groups. . . . I talked a lot with other mentors during the process. (final interview, Mentor 2)

The training was important—I got a lot of great ideas from it. There was comfort in knowing I could call other mentors to ask for their help. (final interview, Mentor 4)

Several participants suggested a need for even more interaction with other mentors:

I needed more mentoring and better direction. I also needed more regular interaction with other mentors. Maybe it should be structured so that mentors meet at during each development activity. (final interview, Mentor 1)

I always feel like I just need to get out of their way in the mentor development sessions because they have so much to just talk about with each other. I wish mentors could meet more often in these kinds of programs. (researcher's log, Conway)

The finding that mentors need mentors should not be a surprise, given that teachers in general have such a need for communication with colleagues (Borko, 2004). As we examined the transcripts from these teachers regarding the need for peer interaction, one of the issues that struck us in this context was that there appeared to be a need for the mentors to know how to evaluate their success as mentors. Other than knowing if their mentees returned to teaching in the second year, there was no way for mentors to have a sense of how they were doing. It is notable that mentors in this study were part of an initiative that provided an opportunity for them to meet regularly and yet they still expressed a desire for more time to meet with one another. Mentor program designers and researchers might continue to explore strategies for music mentor interaction, feedback, and evaluation.

Time Management

Finding time for the professional development of the mentors, in addition to time for the mentors to be mentors, was a tremendous challenge throughout the project. Year 1 note card responses included the following: "How can I be an effective mentor when I am so busy and can find so little time to physically spend with my mentees?" and "Time is so critical. I feel guilty when I am away from my kids at school." Year 2 summaries included "scheduling" and "time away from classroom" as two of the major challenges in the program. Program coordinators tried to be aware of the constraints of time:

Mentor development activities were scheduled on weekends and monthly seminars for mentee development were held on various days of the week in an attempt to minimize

teachers being absent from the same classes each month. Mentors were encouraged to establish regular routines for communication and interaction (e.g., weekly e-mails, phone calls, meeting after school) that did not interfere with the school day. (program coordinator log, Holcomb)

However, final interviews still reflected the concern about time:

Missing class time is a huge drawback. Time is precious. I wish there was a better way. (final interview, Mentor 3)

Avoid having too many mentor trainings (and grant activities) during class time—Fridays after school and Saturdays are preferred. Mentor interactions do not need to be one time per month. We did better with email and phone calls rather than monthly meetings. We found ways to keep in touch. Have meetings every couple of months. (final interview, Mentor 2)

I had good intentions to do more with my mentees but did not have time to follow up. (final interview, Mentor 5)

Mentors regularly expressed concerns about mentoring activities that caused them to be away from their classes and after-school activities. It should not be surprising that successful music teachers, with high standards for themselves and their students, wanted to be present for essential instructional and rehearsal time. Past music mentoring research (Conway, 2003a) has documented that time for mentoring is a key concern from the mentee perspective as well. In that study, beginning teachers were often unable to attend mentor activities that took place outside the school day. In designing this mentor project, the assumption was that evening and weekend activities would not be well attended by mentees. Although not collected as data for this study, mentees' communications did not suggest strong concerns about being away from classes. It is possible that the perceptions of mentors and mentees toward school absences are not congruent.

Challenge of Communication With Mentee

The theme of communication with the mentee was a constant challenge documented in the study. The Year 2 work group summary included "communication with mentee," along with "lack of interest," "not open to suggestions," and "not wanting help," as the most talked-about challenges—specifically, concerns of "bridging the gap between mentor and mentee experience levels," "putting what you see into words for the mentee," and "striking a balance between helping the mentee and allowing their independence." Both professional development workshops included work on communication. Participants did suggest that this time was valuable: "It was good to have our thoughts and opinions validated. It was helpful to look at mentoring from the mentees perspective. Presenter was very good a validating our concerns and not trivializing" (final interview, Mentor 7).

They also suggested that workshops that focus on strategies for communication are important before the start of the mentor work:

The training provided badly needed clarification. Without training, mentoring was so ambiguous. The first year training provided much more direction. (final interview, Mentor 6)

Provide training before starting. Make sure we have clear goals. We need to know ways to help teachers be better teachers—that is different than teaching children. (final interview, Mentor 7)

It appears that participants valued the mentor development sessions that focused on communication with the mentee, and yet this was still a difficult component of mentoring. Both mentor development workshops included cooperative learning activities as well as collaborative learning activities regarding communication. For purposes of this discussion, the difference between the two was that in cooperative learning, the participants were given a task, and they completed that task in groups as the facilitator assisted; in collaborative learning, however, the participants generated their own activities to learn together and from one another. Mentor development program designers might continue to explore strategies for attaining and practicing communication skills for mentors. The finding expressed here—that mentors felt the need for discussion of their roles in advance of their work—is important for future mentor program designers and researchers to consider.

Observations Are Important but Difficult

All the mentors agreed that it is crucial that the mentor observe the mentee. From the first workshop, multiple participants responded to the question “What will help you to help your mentee?” with responses coded as *skills for observing*. However, most of them felt unprepared for that role, even with the professional development provided. Most of them discussed the need for more preparation in different types of observation strategies. The Year 2 summary suggests that “helping the mentee focus on specific aspects of teaching” and “honoring what is important to individuals” were challenges in observation.

Within the discussions on observation, many of the participants discussed the need for good listening skills. Their initial open-ended responses to the question “What do you believe to be the characteristics of a good mentor?” resulted in 6 of 11 participants beginning with “good listener” or “reflective listener” as the most important characteristic. Mentor final interviews reflected this need for listening as well: “Provide more training on reflective listening—teaching mentors to be listeners in context of a conversation” (final interview, Mentor 2).

The importance of observation and the difficulty of doing observation well formed the most cited theme in our data. In a study of mentor stances in observation conferences with mentees, Helman (2006) suggested,

Supporting the mentor to refine his or her skills in using the various stances will take explicit intent, time, and practice. . . . This study confirmed our belief that mentoring is a complex activity. . . . Clearly one cannot simply pull veteran teachers out of the classroom, call them mentors, and expect them to have the skills needed to handle this complex work. (p. 81)

Teachers in our study seemed to feel that they got better at observing but that it was a constant challenge and an area for continued attention.

Technology Can Be a Positive Resource for Mentor and Mentee Interaction

Technology training and application as a part of the professional development experience served as a positive resource for mentors and mentees—specifically, creating teaching resources using music software, creating Web pages and video excerpts of classroom events, and constructing electronic portfolios:

Technology was a great equalizer as some mentees knew a lot about technology while some mentors knew nothing. I think it helped the self-esteem of some the mentees to be identified as technology experts. (final interview, Mentor 2)

I appreciated the push into technology and was thrilled to get the equipment. It forced me to get going with technology. The amount of information (areas to learn/improve) was overwhelming. (final interview, Mentor 3)

Technology was the biggest challenge but also the biggest growth step. I appreciated the one-on-one support I got from other mentors. (final interview, Mentor 6)

It is apparent that mentors appreciated all technology resources, training, and support opportunities provided throughout the professional development experience. Professional development activities included opportunities for mentors and mentees to serve as technology experts, contributing to technology growth and to overall mentoring effectiveness. The comment from the participant suggesting that technology is an equalizer represents a theme evident in our research journals. After the first mentor workshop in Year 1, we both noted that mentors were interested in being seen by the mentees as resources and that mentors had even suggested that they be called *MRTs* (music resource teachers) rather than *mentors*. In this study, technology created an opportunity for mentors and mentees to focus on resources. Future researchers and program developers may explore other avenues for a focus on resources.

Support by Mentors, Not Evaluation

Both mentor development sessions included discussion regarding the sometimes-fine line between supporting and evaluating mentees. The Year 2 summaries included “avoiding negative judgments based on one lesson or day” as a specific

challenge of mentoring. Final interviews included comments about support and not evaluation as well:

There is a fine line between mentoring and evaluating someone's teaching. Some mentees were very strong to start with. The challenge is knowing how much to get involved when you see things that you would do differently—or that could be improved. (final interview, Mentor 2)

The training was very helpful. I wanted to be a friend to my mentees . . . to help them out. The training helped me define my role not to be a judge. (final interview, Mentor 7)

The mentor literature includes considerable discussion of the balance between support and evaluation in the work of mentors (Feiman-Nemser, 1993). The controversy of this issue was discussed with mentors in the professional development sessions. Robinson (2003) discussed the issue in relation to music education and encouraged the profession to consider that,

while early reports advocated the separation of assistance and evaluation, current thought is beginning to solidify around the notion of “the necessary connection between assessment and support. Still, questions about the meaning of support and the function of assessment remain” (Feiman-Nemser, Schwille, Carver, & Yusko, 1999, p. 27). . . . Many of us in education have been uncomfortable with the idea of mixing the roles of helper and evaluator when it comes to new teachers. If we are truly interested in re-professionalizing education, however, it may be time to take on this responsibility as our colleagues in medicine and law have done. (p. 131)

Music educators must continue to grapple with this issue. In this study, the mentors were to be supportive only and not evaluative, and although mentors knew their role, the struggle to balance support with evaluation remained. Issues of power and control are inherent components in any relationship and so must continue to be studied in this and other music education contexts.

What Suggestions Do Music Mentors Have Regarding Their Preparation for Work as Music Mentors?

Throughout the 2 years of the project, participants provided many suggestions for mentoring. Figure 2 includes suggestions for observation developed in the Year 2 work group. Figure 3 includes suggestions for mentoring based on the Year 2 overall summaries.

We were encouraged by the suggestions generated by the music teachers in this study regarding mentoring. Notable in these figures is that suggestions appear to be generic (not music content related). However, virtually all the content of the interactions at the mentor development sessions were centered on music instruction. There were role-plays, discussions of curricular alignment, debates about methods, and

Figure 2
Tips for Success in Observation

- | Tips for Success in Observation |
|---|
| -Mentee observe mentor |
| -Mentor observe mentee |
| -Visibility—modeling our ability to develop professionally |
| -Mentors sharing our own vulnerabilities |
| -Developing a sense of community (open dialogue, safe for risk taking/sharing) |
| -Establish trust |
| -Be nonthreatening |
| -Model following a consistent curriculum |
| -Give lots of positive feedback |
| -Offer resources; share lessons |
| -Help mentees to set expectations (Why do we do this? What do we hope to achieve?) |
| -Guide mentees to verbalize alternative ways of teachings (What if...?) |
| -Talking prior to observation with menu of focus areas/guide them to choose so they are not overwhelmed |
| -Build off of their experiences and honor them |
| -Tape the students not the teacher on the first visitation |
| -Tape mentees (let them self-evaluate) |
| -Make sure time is scheduled to include reflection (the sooner, the better—that day) |

Figure 3
General Tips for Mentoring

- | General Tips for Mentoring |
|--|
| -Make it impossible to get blown off (don't send an e-mail and give up) |
| -Sometimes it is good to show them that it can be done with these kids? Ask to model with their kids |
| -Find balance; know when to listen and when to help problem solve |
| -Build trust—less threatening to talk about things like technology than changing your teaching |
| -Sit together at lunch during seminars |
| -Model that "We are all learners here" |
| -E-mail mentees with three reflective questions each week |
| -Mentor should develop awareness of mentee's teaching environment |
| -Look to what mentee can teach you/Empower them to do that |
| -Provide encouragement; positive feedback |
| -Have conversations rather than telling them what to do |

stories of children engaged in singing, moving, playing, composing, and improvising. From our heuristic perspective, the strength in this mentor development program was that music teachers were able to interact with other music teachers about music teaching. Shore and Stokes (2006) presented findings from an investigation of a discipline-specific induction program in science and suggested that beginning science teachers and mentors who work with science teachers benefit from the science-specific content in that program:

Support programs for new teachers typically socialize them into organizational cultures of school and general norms of teaching. Induction programs rarely introduce teachers

to a lasting, well-supported professional community knit together by abiding interests in learning more about, and teaching a subject discipline. (p. 107)

It was our observation that this music mentor project did create such an environment for these music mentor teachers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The profession needs a larger research base to inform mentor program designers and policy makers regarding the preparation of mentors for work with music teachers. Some of the data collected for this study suggests that mentoring may be a valuable professional development activity for the mentors. Teacher education researchers have begun to examine the role of mentoring in overall school restructure and reform (Gless, 2006). Regarding music education, Robinson (2005) concluded his presentation of the experiences of veteran teachers in a teacher assessment program in Connecticut with the following: "Perhaps the opportunity to become involved with beginning teacher mentoring, induction, and assessment initiatives can be the means through which our more experienced colleagues can find the room to grow without leaving the classroom entirely" (p. 58). We conclude this article with the voice of our mentors in support of Robinson's suggestion and hope that other researchers will explore these possibilities as well:

As a result of my mentoring experience, I play recorder every week with other teachers. Mentoring taught me that I like to teach teachers. Even another mentor called me for help. (final interview, Mentor 4)

I really learned a lot about myself in this program. I became a better teacher by observing another mentor—I took 10 pages of notes! (final interview, Mentor 8)

I know that I am a better teacher. (final interview, Mentor 3)

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