

Identities of music teachers: Implications for teacher education

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Abstract

Teachers' professional identity influences their decisions and behaviour (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000). Teacher education has the potential to either challenge or maintain preservice teachers' preconceptions of their professional identity, and teacher education should arguably develop in future teachers a professional identity which enables them to be effective throughout their career. This paper reports findings from interviews with 15 early-career music teachers regarding their perceptions of their professional identity. Analysis indicates that early-career music teachers feel a 'passion' for music and teaching music, and view themselves as musicians, music teachers or teachers. This study suggests that discipline specialisation has a unique impact on teachers' identity. Implications for teacher education are discussed.

Introduction

Teachers' early experiences in schools are crucial in determining their attitudes towards teaching, their understanding of the job, their professional behaviour, their classroom practice and their longevity in the profession (Flores, 2001; Ghaith & Shaaban, 1999; Gratch, 2001; Hawkey, 1996; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). These early experiences combine with personal beliefs and prior experiences to form teachers' professional identity, which informs their future practices (Hawkey, 1996).

Teachers' professional identity influences their decisions and behaviour (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000). Accordingly, the process of becoming part of the school community is central to beginning teachers' development as effective teachers (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Unrealistic expectations of teaching life may result in early-career teachers (those teachers in their first few years teaching) being unable to deal with their teaching experiences in a dynamic way (Gratch, 2001; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002).

The discrepancies between teachers' expectations of school life and the realities of teaching often contribute to what is known as *praxisschock*ⁱ (Mark, 1998) (also referred to as praxis shock). If early-career teachers experience praxis shock, then they may reject the knowledge and skills that they learned at university in preference for the knowledge and skills valued by the teaching culture at their school. It is therefore desirable for teacher education to adequately prepare preservice teachers to deal with the realities of school culture so that the early years of teaching can be turned into a positive experience where teachers are enabled to grow and develop their skills (Gratch, 2001; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002).

The extent to which these early experiences in schools impact on teachers' concepts of self (professional identity) and resultant teaching practice depends on how they view themselves as teachers before they begin teaching, and whether or not this is challenged or 'shattered' by the context (Hawkey, 1996). Preservice teacher education provides an opportunity for future teachers to form *realistic* conceptions of their professional identity, therefore minimising the 'shock' felt by many early-career teachers when faced with a context that differs considerably from their expectations (McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2003).

The importance of discipline

Research suggests that the nature of teaching practice is largely dependent on the discipline being taught and the ages of the students (Martinez, 1994). As found in a recent Australian review of teacher education, “it is impossible in any discipline to separate the content from the pedagogy” (Ramsey, 2000, p. 37). Shulman and Sparks (1992) offer an explanation for teachers’ affinity with their discipline area:

Teachers never teach something in general – they always teach particular things to particular groups of [students] in particular settings Individuals who have studied teaching and learning over the past decade have become increasingly convinced that most human learning and teaching is highly specific and situated. There is much less broad transfer and generalizability from one domain to another than we have thought.
(p. 14)

If teaching is “highly specific and situated”, teachers’ professional identities are likely to also be situated within discipline or age level specialisation.

A study by Hargreaves, Welch, Purves, and Marshall (2003) indicates that the professional identities of music teachers are consolidated within the preservice music course (changing very little once they reach their first teaching post), and that as music teachers, they are judged predominantly on their *musical* abilities. This report stops short of describing the professional identities of music teachers; however it does validate the importance of developing healthy professional identities in music teachers during their preservice education, and hints at the importance of musical performance in the development of professional identity. It is therefore deemed necessary to determine what the professional identities of music teachers are, in order for teacher education programs to reflect and address the emerging identities of early-career music teachers and move towards minimising praxis shock (McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2003).

Consequently, this paper explores the particular professional identities of early-career music teachers, with the intention of providing a context from which professional identities could be deconstructed in the preservice teacher education program in order to minimise the incidence of praxis shock.

Method

This study explored the professional identities of 15 early-career secondary classroom music teachers in Queensland, Australia. Interviewees had been teaching in schools for 1-4 years after graduating from the three universities that train more than 90% of the secondary music teachers in Queensland.

Purposeful sampling (cases chosen because they are expected to elicit the most useful information) was used to select participants. Specifically, this study utilized *maximum variation sampling*, which enables searching “for common patterns across great variation” (Glesne, 1999, p. 29). Participants were selected to represent varied teaching experiences and perceptions on the effectiveness of the course. The interviewees comprised 11 females and 4 males, the majority of whom were either somewhat satisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with their preservice course and three who were very satisfied with their preservice course. Interviewees came from a variety of schools including both metropolitan and rural schools in State, Catholic, and non-Catholic Christian contexts.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or by telephone (depending on the distance from researcher). The interview questions that relate to this paper were:

1. How would you describe the job of a secondary classroom music teacher to someone who is completely unfamiliar with what you do?
2. What feelings do you have towards music teaching?

Most respondents described their professional identity in response to question 2. Those that didn't were prompted with examples of professional identities (which included the three categories that were emerging from other interviews). The data were subjected to content analysis to identify themes, concepts and meaning (Burns, 2000).

Results and discussion

A passion for music

When describing their job (question 1), the overwhelming majority of teachers interviewed indicated that they enjoyed their job. Words such as 'love', 'passion' and 'rewarding' were repeatedly used by teachers when describing their feelings towards music teaching.

Antoinette I absolutely love being a music teacher. It is a very rewarding experience to help students strive to achieve their performance goals. I like the fact that I am able to get to know students on a number of levels.

It is clear from the interviews that early-career music teachers want to make music meaningful for students and to help them love music.

Claire I love the fact that you can have a kid that has had no experience in music come into your classroom and you can get them playing three chords on a guitar and see their face light up when they make music. ... I love that part of being a music teacher, it allows kids to create, and they get such an excited feeling, about you know, this is their work, its ... something they've done, you know, from nothing and I think that's one of the best parts about being a music teacher.

Many early-career music teachers in this study also view music education as valuable in a utilitarian way – focussing on its benefits in other (non-musical) areas of life.

Grant I would describe it as teaching students the wonders and enjoyment of music and cultural life. But more importantly I would be saying that I see music as an opportunity to teach students about life, important things like confidence, responsibility, discipline and work ethic, and I use music as my tool to teach that.

Janis I guess that I would describe the job of a secondary music teacher as providing students with an outlet to perform, to express themselves and to be like the person who organises and facilitates it all for them.

In this way, interviewees seem to see their role as music teachers as engaging students with music for the musical experience and for the benefits this provides in other areas of the students' lives. In particular, students' enjoyment in engaging with music seems to greatly impact on music teachers' enjoyment of the job.

Janis I think it's fun, and I really enjoy the interaction, not only with the students but with other staff. And also the opportunity to play a variety of instruments and do a variety of different things in music, you're not just restricted to one aspect of music. You can perform, you can compose, you can do rhythm activities, all that different stuff that you can do with it.

It appears that the 'love' many teachers feel towards their job is related to their passion for music and passing that on to students. Music teachers in this study considered the disagreeable aspects of their jobs to be less important than the intrinsic rewards obtained through students' enjoyment of music. Although all teachers made comments during

their interviews regarding the difficulties faced in their profession, they all indicated a personal passion for music, which seems to override any of their negative sentiments towards their experiences in their early years teaching. Below are some examples of this sentiment, presented without comment:

- Lotte I have some kind of a passion for music in some ways. So I enjoy it a lot. Sometimes, you have the days where you think, oh ... “these kids don’t really feel it as much as you do.” But no, I do it because I love to do it and I like music.
- Carolyn [With] music you have to be very involved to make it good, because you have to be passionate about it, and you have to get kids to be involved, otherwise it’s not going to work.
- Joy I love music teaching because it is what I know best ... because I love giving the girls the opportunity to listen to different types of music, and it is always good when they actually enjoy it as well ... I love playing. I love creating music.
- Grant I love it, I can’t imagine myself doing anything else. Unfortunately sometimes the system makes you feel like you’ve really got to look for another career, because you put your heart and soul into it and at the end of the day you’re only just another number.
- Fiona It’s really rewarding, the children get a lot from it and so can the teachers. It’s also really hard work and a lot of the time we’re not recognised for doing that, it’s expected but we’re not paid for it ... There is nothing better than watching a kids face light up, knowing that they can do it, that they can sing it, or they can play it. And I think that’s the most rewarding thing.
- Colleen I love it! I love it more than I thought that I would, I love everything about it, I love teaching the classroom, I love teaching kids how to sing and play music and all different aspects about it. There are [however] times that I think: “what am I doing, this is far too much work, not enough pay” - that is a big issue for me, because I know that I do a lot of work, and I work very hard.
- Susan Okay. To be really honest, at times I have great difficulty with finding the value in what I do. You know I was saying before about how society doesn’t tend to value music as it does other subjects? I can’t help enjoying what I do. It is great when you get the feedback that “you are doing a good job. My child really enjoys playing in the band or enjoys learning their instrument.” That is certainly a good feeling. It makes you feel that what you are doing is worthwhile.

It is clear from these statements that interviewees’ love of their discipline area is the basis of their ‘passion’ for teaching music. Indeed this ‘passion’ for music may explain why these teachers are continuing to teach regardless of the difficulties they have faced in their early years of teaching.

Professional identity

Although most music teachers in this study indicated a passion for music teaching, they tended to perceive their professional identity in a variety of ways. When describing their feelings towards their job (question 2), the majority of interviewees immediately tended to categorise themselves as:

- A musician, who happens to be teaching;
- A music teacher; or
- A teacher who teaches music.

Each of these categories is explored below.

Musician

Many interviewees have a perception of themselves primarily as musicians, who happen to teach. This is particularly the case for those teachers who *only* teach music.

Fiona [I view myself as a] musician first, and then a music teacher, however, they are almost the same ... and that is why I did my degree at the conservatorium before I did the teaching degree. I had always planned to be a teacher and I thought that if I was a better performer I would be a better teacher, and it has worked out really well.

Joy I'd like to see myself as a musician. ... It would be between musician and music teacher. I think I change between those two roles in any one day ... No I don't consider myself just as a teacher.

Janis A musician [is] someone who plays an instrument, or instruments, and either plays for enjoyment, or plays for a professional reasons. I mean I personally play for enjoyment, and... music teacher[s] do], pretty much the same sort of thing. That's one of the reasons why I decided to do music teaching, because I enjoyed music at school, and wanted to share my musical, or make musical experiences for kids good like the ones that I had at school.

There emerged a perception that successful music teachers have high levels of music skills and knowledge.

Roy The best music schools tend to be the ones who have teachers who are skilful and competent musicians, first and foremost, and educators.

Music teacher

Many music teachers in Queensland are required to teach other subjects, because there are not enough music classes to provide a full-time load. These teachers tend to view themselves as a combination of a music teacher and a generalist teacher, although they may not feel the same passion for other subjects.

Grant I see myself as a teacher and a music teacher, but mainly as a teacher of students, again, with music as the tool [that] I use, but then again, if the deputy comes and says: "can you teach maths?" I basically say no way, because that is not what I'm trained for, and they're not the tools I'm familiar with working with so...I see music as a tool [to help develop] confidence, responsibility, work ethic, that sort of ... I get them enjoying something in their teenage years instead of being very negative, that a lot of teenagers have the tendency to be

Colleen I have a grade eight English and a grade eight SOSE class and we were talking the other day... saying that SOSE was always put on the backburner. If people want to take time off, they take it off during SOSE; a lot of people see it as a bludgy subject, a waste of time, sort of thing. And I said, I completely disagree, I love it that I'm a SOSE teacher now, I love it that I'm an English teacher," then someone said that "when someone on asks you what do you do, what do you say?" And I said that "well honestly that I'm a teacher," and then they said, "well, what do you teach?" and I said "Music, English and SOSE." It does come out in that order, not really intentionally, but I do see myself as a music teacher.

Teachers who view themselves primarily as music teachers may also view themselves as musicians, but not within their professional context.

Carolyn In my spare time I love being a musician, play with the bands that I'm in, etcetera, etcetera. I think I'm very passionate about that, but I also love the kids, I love being involved in them, and seeing them as people, not just going: "music, music, music!" But helping them in other areas, and I think that you can do that being a good communicator, I really enjoy that actually, I enjoy that just as much I think. Otherwise I don't think you could do it, because you don't get paid for all that you do. No I think they're both equal.

Teacher

Sometimes teachers do not consider themselves to be musicians, often because they see their musical skills as sub-standard. These teachers tend to see their professional identity as a teacher who teaches music.

Claire Not a musician! Definitely not ...I think that is one reason why I moved out [into drama teaching] because I didn't feel like a musician and I felt like my musicianship skills were not as strong as they should be ... I feel like that's somewhere where I have fallen down, and I think that's why I'm happy [not teaching music], especially when it comes to senior music ... I've felt like I haven't been strong enough a musician to be able to extend my really gifted kids, ...I know that some of my kids would come to me with compositions and I'd have to go to get someone else to play through them because I just couldn't play them, or couldn't mark them on my own, so that sort of thing I think is very important.

Jessica [I see myself as an] organiser definitely, because I'm the only classroom music teacher here, we've got two instrumental music teachers, definitely organising and shifting bodies and things like that. Yeah, that's a lot of what I do, that would be the only way to describe myself at this moment, that's how I feel ... No [I wouldn't consider myself to be a musician]. Skills have definitely disappeared, I keep up with my singing, but my piano skills have just... like the easiest piece of music is a struggle, and I was like studying for my A.Mus.A on piano.

Implications for teacher education

It seems that teachers who specialise in secondary classroom music may find their professional identity and their feelings regarding teaching to be 'situated' within their discipline specialisation. The interviews revealed that despite their 'passion' for the subject area, music teachers had three separate views regarding their identity. They saw themselves as a musician, a music teacher or a teacher. Their identification with either of these categories appeared to be based on their perceived musical (performance) ability. This is consistent with Hargreaves, Welch, Purves and Marshall's (2003) research which points to the importance placed (by music teachers and the community) on the musical performance skills of music teachers. In the present study, music teachers' perceived ability in the subject area seemed to determine how they viewed themselves professionally – the 'better' they felt they were at music, the more likely they were to see themselves as musicians. Conversely, if they reported little confidence in music skills and knowledge, they were more likely to see themselves as 'teachers'.

Teacher efficacy is a term which refers to teachers' beliefs about their ability to be 'good' teachers. In this study, music teacher efficacy seems to be associated with musical efficacy (the ability to be a 'good' musician). Previous research has shown that strengthening preservice teacher efficacy may enhance teacher efficacy (Gerges, 2001; Ghaith & Shaaban, 1999), but research by Wheatley (2002) suggests that efficacy doubts may not be detrimental, if preservice courses provide students with the skills to utilise efficacy doubts in a way that enables improved teaching practice (Wheatley, 2002).

The three emergent categories of music teacher identity are relevant when considering the design of preservice teacher education courses, because it is likely that preservice music teachers develop (or consolidate) these perceptions whilst at university. When training future music teachers, it may therefore be desirable to guide preservice teachers in deconstructing the three categories of 'musician', 'music teacher', and 'teacher', and their possible links with musical efficacy and efficacy doubts. By engaging in this style

of reflection, early-career music teachers (regardless of their musical ability) will arguably develop the skills to reflect and consolidate their developing professional identities and therefore improve as effective classroom practitioners (Hawkey, 1996).

This paper points to the need for further research into the area of music teachers' identities. In particular:

- It is possible that the three identities of musician, music teacher and teacher (and their underlying emphasis on musical proficiency) may be preventing preservice teachers from valuing university subjects that do not focus specifically on music. The discipline-specific focus may also prevent preservice music teachers from being able to make 'links' between these general subjects and their future context as music teachers. As this research did not specifically address the identities of preservice teachers, this needs further exploration.
- Reflection on professional identity in the preservice course may enable preservice and early-career music teachers to become aware of the possible impact of identity on their ability to cope. Investigating the impact of critical deconstruction of music teaching identities on their ability to cope in their early years of teaching is necessary.

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