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Chris' Story:  
A Novice's Journey Toward Successful Retention

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### Abstract

This case study examines the growth of Chris, a novice string teacher who, after two years of near-failing evaluations, successfully received tenure following his third year of teaching. Observations and interviews with Chris and his supervisors and mentors provided varied perspectives on his progress. Improvement came during the third year, when a newly-appointed supervisor finally identified and worked to remediate serious gaps in Chris' pedagogical knowledge. Teaching experience, Chris' confidence in his own ability to learn to teach, and an appropriate supervisor match were other important factors in his success. Findings suggest that mentoring a struggling novice may require development of a framework for pedagogical knowledge as well as specific teaching techniques, adherence to basic educational principles, and a substantial investment of time. Further research might provide greater understanding of novices' own voices, of the ways they interpret advice, and of combined factors that influence supervisory relationships.

Chris' Story:  
A Novice's Journey Toward Successful Retention

The first years of teaching are often considered critical in novices' decisions to remain in the profession (Bullough, Knowles, & Crow, 1991; Feiman-Nemser, Schwille, Carver, & Yusko, 1999). Considerable research has explored the problems experienced by beginning teachers (Rust, 1994; Valli, 1992). Many novices share concerns of classroom management, isolation, physical exhaustion, difficult teaching assignments, or problems with administrators (Lortie, 1975; Veenman, 1984). Novices in the so-called "special" areas may experience additional problems (Conway, 2003; Napper-Owen & Phillips, 1995). They may be presumed to have acquired considerable breadth of knowledge and skills through their K-12 teacher education program. Researchers have explored concerns unique to novice music teachers (Conway & Garlock, 2002; DeLorenzo, 1992; Haack, 2003; Krueger, 1996). Such concerns include travel to multiple schools; large classes that include children with special needs; teaching assignments which, while legal under a K-12 music license, are outside their expertise; and lack of respect for their content area from administrators, staff, or community.

Studies comparing novice and expert teachers have identified differences in their thinking and behaviors (Elliott, 1992; Berliner, 1987). Experts seem to know which features of complex classroom scenes need their attention, while novices may have difficulty efficiently finding and framing problems (Dewey, 1910/1933; Schön, 1987). Experts more easily integrate knowledge from several domains: declarative (knowing what to teach), procedural (how to teach it), and contextual knowledge (when to teach it) (Marzano & Hutchins, 1985). Novices may find it challenging to transform content knowledge acquired in college to strategies that promote students' learning (Carter, Cushing, Sabers, Stein, & Berliner, 1988). Nearly absent from knowledge-base research in music education is the teachers' own voices (Bresler, 1995; Nierman, Zeichner, & Hobbel, 2002).

Studies identify a national teacher shortage due to multiple factors, including increased population, changes in school policies, lack of qualified applicants, and impending teacher retirements (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Music teacher attrition rates may be lower than for teachers in general (Madsen & Hancock, 2002). However, a critical music teacher shortage currently exists and is predicted to worsen (Kimpton, 2003), suggesting the need to increase our understanding of factors that may affect a novice teacher's longevity in the field. Several studies

have reported factors contributing to the failure of novice teachers (Knowles & Hoefler, 1989; O'Sullivan, 1989; Schmidt & Knowles, 1995). Fewer have focused on factors contributing to their success (Bullough, with Baughman, 1993; Hebert & Worthy, 2001).

This study examines the experiences of a novice teacher who, after two years of near-failing evaluations, ultimately succeeded in securing tenure in his district. Questions guiding the study included:

- What problems did the novice identify?
- What problems were identified by his supervisors and mentors?
- What strategies did the novice and his supervisors use to address these problems?
- What factors contributed to the novice's ultimate success?

#### Method

The primary participant was Chris, a personable African-American male in his early twenties. Chris played string bass, both classical and jazz. He had attended a large state university in the upper midwest, and found a job teaching strings to fourth through sixth graders at three schools in a large urban district in the southwest. Two other participants were Al and David, two district string teacher supervisors who worked with Chris.

Data for this case study were collected over two years. During the first year, Chris, then in his second year of teaching, volunteered to help as an instructor in the university's String Project, an after-school program for children taught primarily by university music education majors, supervised by experienced school teachers and myself, the university faculty's string education specialist. Following Chris' second year of teaching, it became apparent that he was in danger of not being offered a contract for a fourth year, the official time of tenure in the district. I offered to assist the district string supervisor in working with Chris during his third year, and also requested permission to conduct joint research with them. Approval was granted, and I worked with Chris that year, both in his schools and in the String Project. Chris also served, under my supervision, as a mentor for two preservice teachers in the Project.

Data included notes, video and audio tapes of my observations of Chris' work in his three schools and in the String Project. I also collected samples of his lesson plans for his own teaching, and emails and recordings of his advice to the preservice teachers he mentored. Interviews with Chris and his district supervisors provided additional insights into Chris' growth. Because I was involved with Chris in multiple roles, as researcher and as one of his mentors.

When these roles conflicted as Chris and I discussed his teaching, I most often gave priority to the mentor function, addressing a question Chris had, rather than pursuing my own research agenda at that point. I used researcher memos (Strauss, 1987) and careful analysis of interview transcripts to document my interventions. I also invited Chris and David to read and amend this report of Chris' experiences, and had several peers with research experience check for coherence.

### Chris' Story

#### *Al's perspective*

Before his second year of teaching, Chris introduced himself to me and volunteered to assist with the String Project. He spoke intelligently and played his instrument well, leading me to believe he was a well-qualified teacher. A month later, Al, the district music supervisor, called to tell me that Chris' teaching was "a disaster," and that I should not let him teach in the Project. I was surprised, but assigned Chris to assist with a class taught by Ann, an experienced "model" teacher, and several preservice teachers. I soon learned that Ann also taught full time in Chris' district, and Al had assigned her to be Chris' district mentor. Al hoped that Chris would use Ann as a resource and "pick up some ideas" from observing her teaching in the String Project. However, the district had no formal training for the mentor's role. Because Ann's two schools were far from Chris' schools, most of their contact was by phone and at the String Project classes.

Throughout most of that year, Ann and I appreciated Chris' intelligent contributions to discussions in String Project teacher meetings, leading us to believe that he was improving. Meanwhile, Al observed Chris' apparent lack of progress and began to think that Chris "didn't have a clue." With every observation, perhaps out of frustration, he gave Chris a different set of goals for improvement, hoping that "one of them would stick." By the end of that year, Al concluded that Chris either could not or did not want to be helped, and was in danger of failing.

That summer, Al retired. David, himself an experienced string teacher in the district, took over as supervisor for Chris' third year. In his final week in the job, Al briefed David and me about Chris' impending failure. He handed David a large file documenting his two years' of observations of Chris. Several times, as he became concerned by what he observed, following district protocol, Al had written "growth plans" that outlined criteria for improvement against which Chris would be evaluated. Three were to be the focus in Chris' third year.

1. Develop specific lesson plans for all fourth grade classes, with scope and sequence based on the [district] orchestra curriculum.
2. Develop a strategy to consistently monitor students' playing posture and bow stroke, concentrating on weight, speed, and contact point.
3. Develop and maintain a specific written log for each student's progress, 4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> grade, to foster individual progress. The following are to be included in the student log: attendance, instrument, full practice log, test results, developing the use of a rubric to measure individual student achievement based on performance skills.

In addition to these growth plans, Al enumerated other problems and told us how he had attempted to remediate them. He was concerned to observe “no visible routine” in Chris' classes. One day, the students were sitting in a “haphazard” order and Al recommended that it would be “best to have beginners stand up. . . . [And the next time] there were no chairs, so then it was just this helter-skelter because the kids were moving all the time.” Chris' “understanding of violin [was] just very, very lacking.” His violin playing did not provide “a good model” for the students and he asked Al “strange” questions about “basic things” like specific string instrument positions and fingerings. Al regularly observed that, “if there's 10 kids in a class, 9 out of 10 are not holding their thumb in the right place,” yet Chris still told the students, “Yes, that's good.” Chris seemed similarly unaware of inappropriate student behavior. Even in a class of four students, he used an “overpowering, projecting outside” voice, and appeared to be “teaching to someone way out there [with] no clue what's going on under his nose.”

Even during the middle of class, you know, he'd be talking to someone and someone else would just get up and walk to the other side of the class. “Well, don't do that.” [The student would say,] “Oh, OK,” and then just kept on going. Whatever he said, there was absolutely nothing, absolutely nothing to the kids that he was trying to discipline them. Al told Chris, “You're saying the right things,” but “getting the kids to want to do what you're saying is the trick to being a good teacher.” He sent Chris to observe Stan, a veteran teacher who produced outstanding elementary orchestras using game-show teaching methods. The next time Al observed Chris, Chris was using one of Stan's games, but gave the students a candy prize whether or not they held their instruments correctly. Al told him,

Chris, the kids *like* you. Use it! If they're not doing it, show them disappointment. . . . If they're not doing things correctly, they *should* feel bad. . . . You know, feeling bad is not

necessarily a bad thing. Not if it's to lead you to something good. And then you can give a reward.”

The school district assigned elementary instrumental music teachers to two to four schools, based on the numbers of students enrolled the previous spring. Consequently, Al was alarmed when he observed “a significant drop in student participation” in the second year at one of Chris' two schools. That resulted in Chris' assignment to three schools for the following year.

Al thought that perhaps Chris was also getting “a good bit” of advice from his assigned district mentor Ann. He took as “an indication that he wants to do it” Chris' initiative to come work with the university's String Project, but was “disappointed” that he did not use the intervening summers to observe the district's summer program teachers. He “liked” Chris and found him “very personable.” Yet, after two years, Al remained puzzled because Chris appeared so unable to implement his advice.

You know, he appears open to any suggestion you give. He's very cooperative. Even so much so that, one time I said, “You know, you say all the right things, Chris. I'm not sure you're just bullshitting me.” Because I've had teachers [where] it was like they had no intention of doing what we were asking them to do. But they said, “Yes, yes, yes,” so we felt comfortable walking out. I said, “Chris, I don't think you're one of those people, I really don't. But something's missing here. And you're not, you're not getting it.”

Al concluded that Chris needed “to be taught how to teach. He knows *nothing*.” He wished David luck, saying he wanted to believe the situation was not “a lost cause.”

### *My perspective*

Chris met with me four times over that summer, for several hours each time. He was clearly concerned about how to address the growth plans. He set a goal of addressing the first growth plan by writing a year's worth of lesson plans for the fourth grade beginners. He said he wanted to use the first and third quarters of the year to “teach technique” and the second and fourth semesters for “music,” which I understood to mean concert preparation, but he was not sure how to begin. I explained that I liked to plan “backwards,” identifying the skills students should learn, selecting music that requires them to learn those skills, and then developing plans to help them successfully learn the music. For our second meeting, I asked Chris to develop a list of skills he wanted to teach at each grade level, and use that to choose his concert repertoire. By the next meeting, he reported that he chose to work from the district curriculum, rather than

develop his own list of skills, and he had selected a two-year rotation of concert songs, with two concerts per year and beginning and intermediate levels for each concert. He had reasons for the music he selected, but he found it difficult to list all the skills the children would need to perform those pieces. For example, he had chosen a round for each concert to prepare students to perform in parts, but the four rounds he selected did not progress in a logical (to me) pedagogical sequence from semester to semester. We spent most of the rest of our summer meetings discussing specific pedagogical techniques for beginning string classes. In particular, Chris seemed interested in knowing what to teach first and how to build skills in a logical sequence. By the end of the summer, he had decided on a format for each class: while the students unpacked their instruments and he tuned them, he would have the students complete a short worksheet and check it with a partner. Then he would lead some warm-ups, physical stretches and scales, and work on a piece. He also developed a rotation of using one of Stan's "games" in each class. He had hoped to write a year's worth of lesson plans over the summer, figuring that "by the end of two years, outside of switching a song here and there, they'll just be done." He eventually abandoned that idea and settled on completing 10 plans in preparation for his first meeting with David.

#### *David's perspective*

David's position with the district was split, with half of his time spent teaching strings at an elementary school, and half spent as district supervisor for strings. He wanted to do everything possible to help Chris succeed, particularly to make sure that his inexperience as a new supervisor did not impede Chris' progress. Throughout the first two-hour discussion with Al, David raised questions and suggested possible explanations for what Al had observed. He wondered whether Chris' performance skills on double bass, his major instrument, were acceptable, despite what Al observed in his violin playing, and Al did not know. He pointed out that all but the most experienced teachers would have difficulty using Stan's games effectively, and Al agreed. In developing his own classroom routines, David believed it was "important to go through that process of thinking, 'Why do I want them to put their instrument cases over there instead of there?'" He speculated about what might be missing from Chris' understanding.

What I think, at least the way my brain works, is I want my sixth graders or my fifth graders or my junior high or my summer orchestra program, this is what I want it to sound like. I've got this idea. And then we just proceed along [towards] that. . . . Chris'



problem may be that he doesn't know what he wants. I'm not sure he really knows, like what a good bow hold is, and he is not being discriminating.

David met with Chris before school started, and Chris showed him the ten lesson plans he had written. David acknowledged the work that Chris had done, and suggested that he probably had planned more for each lesson than could be accomplished in a half hour. After their meeting, David called me, because he "didn't want to confuse Chris" with both of us giving him too many different ideas.

I said, "This is all good stuff, but what's missing, what I don't see here is any checking for understanding. I don't see that communication loop, where you are sure they understand." I think the pieces he's chosen are appropriate, and he's done a lot of good work. . . . I also told him, "You'll have to find your own voice. Don't just do what you see other people do." . . . Then I said, "Why don't you show them on the bass?" . . . If you're battling your own technique, you can't be thinking about the students. My goal is to simplify things for him and then build on that success.

David visited Chris' classroom at least weekly, although his own teaching schedule did not allow him to observe the beginning classes that were identified in the growth plan. He was frustrated, because "each time, [he was] impressed with some of the things Chris did and, by the end of the lesson, [he was] depressed." In particular, Chris seemed to spend so long on the worksheets and warm-ups that, "by the time he got to the meat of the lesson, it was over." Chris also seemed unaware that the music he had chosen was not appropriate for all the students, even though they were all in the same grade-level classroom.

I just feel like it's too little too late. This should have started a couple of years ago. I feel like I'm being asked to come in after the disease has progressed and trying to cure it. . . . It's not a fair question. Here's the big question—is he teachable? I like a lot of things about him, but we're up against this deadline. . . . If he took the attitude that "this year, I'll just take the paycheck, I don't care," I'd feel differently. I like his attitude. . . . And he's trying hard.

Even as David struggled to identify the best course of action to take in terms of district protocol, he kept telling Chris, "My goal is to help you become the best teacher you can be. It would make me incredibly happy to see you blossom."

### Discussion

Chris' case highlights some of the difficulties in mentoring struggling novices. Chris was a highly competent performer, and intelligently discussed some aspects of pedagogy. He appeared “open to suggestions,” tried “not to be quiet about when [he] needed help,” and seemed to be trying hard to follow the advice we all gave him, yet for almost two and a half years, we were puzzled by his apparent inability to demonstrate much progress in his teaching. As Chris learned of Al's concern during his second year, he attempted to express to me his confusion with knowing how to “fix” his teaching, but his questions were unfocused and I was unsure how to help. I identified factors that contributed to a feeling that all of us were in a fog. In the following sections, I discuss Chris' insufficient pedagogical knowledge, the difficulties this created in his being able to ask for help, differences in mentoring style of his supervisors, and factors that led to the appearance of his not following advice. I conclude this discussion with some thoughts about Chris' growth through the year.

#### *Pedagogical knowledge*

Chris' case supports other research suggesting that beginning teachers need to develop not only declarative content knowledge, but also both procedural pedagogical knowledge and contextual pedagogical knowledge (Marzano & Hutchins, 1985; Nierman, Zeichner, & Hobbel, 2002). While Chris could talk intelligently about some aspects of pedagogical knowledge in the declarative sense, he was missing procedural and contextual knowledge needed for string teaching that we assumed he had. In addition, he had not successfully integrated the various types of knowledge that he had developed so that he could appropriately use it in the classroom. For example, David observed one of Chris' sixth-grade classes over several weeks. He noticed that, every time he came, he heard the same thing, “the D scale, some theory, and two measures of” the Bach Minuet. The students were clearly struggling with those two measures so, after watching the same scenario for several classes, David asked the class how many years they had played their instrument and discovered that, of the seven in the class, six had started their instrument a month before. Chris said he remembered Al telling him that older beginners “should just get in with their grade and they have to catch up because they missed their chance [to begin with the others] in fourth grade.” Chris reported that, at the time, he “was like, ‘I don't necessarily know about that,’” but did what Al asked. David talked with Chris about choosing

more appropriate music and helped him plan priorities for using the 30-minute lesson to the best advantage.

I told Chris, “The meat of every lesson should be preparing the concert music. Musette is too difficult for beginners, [even if they are in sixth grade]. What is your ultimate goal? The bottom line is, your program is going to be supported by the kids playing, and playing well.”

Both Chris and David told me about a day that was a real turning point for both of them. On the day before fall break, David invited Chris to come to his school. David reported, “Nobody has worked harder than Chris has. [That] day, he came in and we read through all the music I could find. We were on secondary instruments, so we’d be kind of equal. I would kind of lead the phrases, and he would play it back to me—we really made chamber music! And I said, “Chris, you’ve just shown me that you’re a real musician. That’s great!” Then I asked him, “What elementary orchestra do you want your elementary orchestra to sound like?” And he didn’t have a clue. So I talked to him and found out his hobby is brewery. So I said, “Well, you must have some idea what you want the beer to taste like.” And I asked him, “Have you ever listened to another elementary school orchestra?” And he hadn’t. . . . I felt it was a turning point. And it was a good bonding thing as well as a feeling that “I think this is going to work.”

From that point on, although Chris’ classroom actions still sometimes puzzled us, we were able to see progress. David and I each went to one of Chris’ concerts in December. We agreed that “the kids played in tune, and [their instrument positions] looked good, and they sounded good.” Even more important, David saw “a real confidence there.” He was relieved to acknowledge that, “Yeah! This is a performance, not an apology.” David continued, “I think now we need to push Chris. This is great, they’re playing together, they’re in tune, they’re well rehearsed. So now, what are you going to do to get them to the next level?”

To me, a particularly poignant example of the effects of Chris’ lack of pedagogical knowledge was revealed the day before he went to that first meeting with David.

The other question I have, and I’m almost kind of embarrassed to ask it, um, do you know of like, any good, just like teacher supply stores for just different like, just lesson plan books and what not? Because I know there’s like a list of stuff that we can get from our own district, but there’s never like any pictures of what things look like. And I’ve

looked at different web sites for like Staples and Office Max, but I don't know what they're called. . . . There was this one great desk calendar that I got to use when I was doing my long-term [substitute] position. It was just for one week, and it had different boxes down the side, so you could do it by period, so that would help me a little more. So, OK, "Mrs. Adams' class, they are a little off on this one, so I need to go back." . . . I'd like to have one of those for each of my three schools, so I have a little more idea of what specifically happened in this last class, so I can look at that and go, "Oh, this is the class where we fell behind on this one. OK, now I've got to catch up."

I showed Chris some old lesson plan books I had, and suggested that he could request one at each of his schools. After a few months, Chris reported that "having these lesson plan books at all my schools" had been a "lifesaver," as he used his own shorthand to help track students' progress. Feeling organized appeared to be important to Chris, and being assigned to three schools "probably made [him] organize [himself] more," developing routines such as "this is going to be the day I write lesson plans for next week, and this is going to be my day to get grades in the computer." Experiencing the results of doing those things helped Chris "realize how important it was to have those routines in place." It is unlikely that simply having a plan book in his first year would itself have cleared up Chris' confusion. However, it remains amazing to me to think that so small a missing bit of knowledge could have contributed to Al's perception that Chris was unable to structure a lesson or assess his students' progress.

An additional serendipitous factor played into Chris' growth in pedagogical knowledge. For several reasons, I assigned Chris to mentor two undergraduates teaching in our university's String Project.<sup>1</sup> Watching them teach sharpened Chris' perceptions of his own teaching.

Because I'd be talking with [them] about something and I'd be like, "Ew, I probably did that when David was there." [*We laughed.*] I didn't pick that up on my own by myself. So I think that was really big, with this being my tenure year, knowing that I was getting evaluated it helps to actually look at somebody else doing something and kind of help them out. So I think that by doing these beginning lessons, it straightened out the

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<sup>1</sup> I presented a separate paper exploring this aspect of Chris' growth, "Mentoring and Being Mentored: The Story of a Novice Teacher's Success," at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, April 11-15, 2005.

fundamentals in my own plan also. By watching and evaluating it helps me realize what *I* was getting evaluated on. So that helped also.

At the end of the year, I learned another reason for Chris' lack of pedagogical knowledge. Chris told me he had become aware some deficiencies in his preparation for teaching, which might have allowed him to “clear this up back then.” He felt he did himself a “disservice” in choosing his student teaching placements. He “didn't see a lot of string jobs out there and was a little bit more jazz-focused then,” so he chose to student teach in elementary general music and high school band, “just because I wanted to be ready for whatever was out there, and I figured, ‘I do strings. If I need to I can figure that out a little bit later. Let me get this band under my belt just in case I need it.’” In addition, while student teaching gave him “a good sampling of ways to teach different things, he was there such a short time he “didn't get to see the full process” of lesson and curriculum planning. After graduation, Chris worked as a substitute teacher “wherever he could get a job,” and eventually found a three-month position at a large arts magnet elementary school with a staff of three other string teachers. By that point in the year, Chris said the other teachers had chosen “their own curriculum.” Apparently, he never thought about why the teachers had chosen those pieces or what their pedagogical goals were. Although Chris found that situation helpful to his development, I suspect that it also contributed to his confusion about the purpose and development of a sequential elementary string curriculum.

#### *The feeling of not knowing*

I asked Chris at several points to reflect on what he felt he had learned during the year of the study. At the end of the year, he described what he considered the most important growth.

I think a lot of it for me was just to get my pacing together. And not necessarily pacing for what I wanted to do *during* class, but just the whole year, you know, just looking at the whole program and what I'm trying to do, and just figuring out, “Well, if I want to get to this place by May, what do I need to do to get there?” So a lot of it was pacing those skills out. And, I don't know, I think I probably tried to fight writing out my lesson plans a little bit more at the beginning, and now I just really wouldn't do it without doing it that way. . . . But a lot of it was just, like I said, getting that flow going of what I doing, and pacing it through, and understanding how to lead from one step to the other. That was pretty big for me.

This description reflects that Chris indeed had had large gaps in his pedagogical knowledge, although he could not articulate it to us at the time. The study's data suggest that the central problem was not that Chris was not trying to improve, but that he could not understand how to improve. Schön's (1987) description of the novice's dilemma of not knowing presents a more eloquent way of describing the fog Chris felt he was in.

The paradox of learning a really new competence is this: that a student cannot at first understand what he needs to learn, can learn it only by educating himself, and can educate himself only by beginning to do what he does not understand. (p. 93)

The novice's sense of not knowing also meant that Chris initially had difficulty finding and framing problems in his teaching (Dewey, 1910/1933; Schön, 1987). What Al interpreted as laziness or lack of desire to improve seemed to be directly related to Chris' poorly developed pedagogical knowledge. Overwhelmed by too many things to focus on, he was unable to frame specific problems from "messy, indeterminate situations" (Schön, 1987, p. 4), and consequently unable to frame questions and ask for help. Al commented that Chris did not seem to "ask a lot of intelligent questions," which he interpreted as lack of interest. In analyzing the transcripts of my discussions with Chris, I noticed that initially he did seldom ask direct questions. Instead, he seemed to wonder out loud about things that were puzzling him.

I guess the main thing outside of that that I want to work on—and I haven't really figured out a way to address it yet—is how to mark their music with notes and numbers. I see either all or nothing, and I'm trying to figure out a way to find a happy medium. Because I know how *I* like to do it, but that doesn't mean it's necessarily going to work for all the kids.

Chris seemed to use these wonderings, rather than direct questions, to invite suggestions. In retrospect, I suspect we all missed some of these requests. By the end of the study Chris, in his discussions with me, was asking somewhat more focused questions about the teaching skills he wanted to refine.

Because right now, my grades—I've gone back and forth each year on how I kind of do them. . . . But, as far like the worksheets that kind of hit on all of these things, I didn't really do a written test on those things, it was just we did them in class and that was about it. So, what do you think about having that be, like, a graded thing?

It was about three months into the school year before Chris could claim that he was “starting to get what needs to happen with the order of what I teach in what order.” As Schön suggests, gaining teaching experience was a crucial element in Chris' progress through the fog. Although experience alone does not guarantee learning, it does appear to be a crucial element in beginning teachers' progress (Dewey, 1938; Schmidt, 1994, 2005). Chris contrasted his “first couple years,” which were “just putting things in place,” with his growing ability to “refine” his own teaching.

Like I said, as I get through it I start seeing these things *now*, because I've gone through it. I didn't come in probably with a clear view of what really I was coming into. And now I've got a better idea of everything that needs to be going on. . . . I don't know, maybe it just took me longer to see what I needed to do before. And now I can kind of understand, OK, I need to take this from here and keep moving on.

#### *Filtering advice*

Although the gaps in Chris' pedagogical knowledge and his general confusion could account for some of Chris' apparent inability to follow suggestions, he also articulated some conscious choices. It seemed to me that, as Chris developed his own pedagogical knowledge and philosophy of teaching, he began to have more confidence, both in his ability to make choices and in the choices themselves. Even though he was aware of the pressure to succeed imposed by the district's evaluation process, he became less focused on doing what he thought “they were looking for” than on developing his own teaching style. A major criterion he used was that, with any suggestion from us, he wanted to “make it where [*he*] felt comfortable with it.” As he became more articulate about his goals for his students, he could make more informed decisions about suggestions from David regarding the lesson plans he submitted by email.

I didn't do all of [David's suggestions], I know that. But the ones that I thought were something that would help out with what I was trying to get at, I definitely tried. And it wasn't necessarily that when he was asking to switch things around that it was something that was overwhelming good or bad to do. Sometimes it was just a little bit, “Well, maybe this group of kids aren't quite there yet to try it that way yet”—to mix it up in that different way. Or I may have introduced it in a certain way that his comments may have not made as much sense if he would have known all the other background. So certain

things like that I wouldn't always do but if he had a comment, and I could see that, "Yeah, this does makes sense," I would definitely try those out and make adjustments.

In addition, as he tried to make sense out of the suggestions we offered, Chris took charge of some areas in which he did feel a sense of direction. One example of Chris' proactive approach was his unwillingness to accept Al's assessment that the "lower participation" at one of the schools was due entirely to his teaching methods. Chris knew he did not have the same problem at his more affluent schools, and "was really upset with the catch-22 [he] was being put in." He believed his numbers were low at that school because most families were lower socioeconomic status, and he "didn't have [enough school-owned] instruments to give the kids." His mother advised him to "ask some stores, because you never know if you don't ask." Chris took her advice. A local music store gave him 29 violins for his students to use, and string class enrollment at that school shot up.

Chris also drew on his own established beliefs to filter our advice. After Al sent Chris to observe Stan's classes, Al, David, and I were all concerned about the way Chris implemented Stan's game-show techniques. As David said, to use the games well to teach required "advanced skills." However, Chris seemed committed to the idea that friendly competition made learning "fun," which he mentioned repeatedly as a way to retain children's interest. We never convinced Chris to abandon the games, but we were able to help him think about appropriate ways to use them. Chris evolved a fairly elaborate schedule for when he would use games, and why.

I think I kept it pretty fun with the fourth grade. And I think part of that was getting some of the games going, and getting more comfortable with how *I* wanted to do games. Because the first year I didn't do any of that. The second year, I got that half way through the year and started putting it in. And it was fun, it was kind of like a crutch that I was sitting on, but it wasn't really was solid in my program as something that I knew where to draw them in, when to use what games and whatnot. And I have a better idea of how to do that now, how to change the games around, and when to use them, when to back off of them. So that helped a lot, to have something like that. During the week, it's just a fun way for them to approach class.

Similarly, both David and I suggested using wall charts to help students be aware of their own progress. As the study ended, Chris reported discussing practice incentives with the band director at one of his schools. His thoughts revealed why he had not taken David's and my suggestions.



And the other thing that we were talking about doing is, since it's not their grade, but incentive points, is start charting it up on the wall. Because I know that a lot of the teachers are big on charting. And I've not really liked it too much, because I never want to put a kid's grade on there and then it would be like, "Oh, they're flunking," you know. But I guess if it's incentive-based that doesn't say exactly what letter grade they're having, I wouldn't mind doing that.

Often, right after he had had an observation with David, Chris would report what they talked about, virtually verbatim. Gradually, he integrated the advice into his practice, with his own modifications, to make it his own. Sometimes when Chris appeared not to take our advice, he "hadn't done it on purpose, it's just [he] forgot about it." Other times, he consciously chose to "shelve" some suggestions for later, till he "could get more formal with them." I puzzled about what Chris meant by "getting formal" with things. From the examples he gave, such as his desire to have his students compose or play popular songs, I finally understood that he meant that he did not want to try an idea until he had developed his own understanding of how children might learn that thing, and how best to introduce and refine their skills in a sequential manner. For instance, Chris described the "formal" sequence he understood for how children learn to read music. Although I was not aware of this aspect of his advice-filtering process during the study, in retrospect, I gave him a great deal of credit for setting his own foci for improvement and refusing to be distracted by more suggestions than he could successfully work on at once.

### *Mentoring style*

An important aspect of Chris' eventual success was the difference between Al's and David's supervisory styles. As a first-year supervisor, David was concerned that, if Chris failed, he would bear part of the responsibility. In addition, he genuinely liked Chris and recognized his desire to improve his teaching. Chris felt Al did not recognize his efforts.

I guess early on I wish I would have had some of the help I'm getting *now* [from David] that first year. Because I put a lot of time into my formal paper work and stuff like that. But it wasn't like I was getting a lot of help with that stuff either. . . . I was new there and I think people weren't comfortable telling me about it, but I think there was a public opinion, I guess, that the orchestra just flat out didn't sound good. And, you know, I could concede to that the first year. I understood about that the first year. The second year I was kind of butting heads with Al on it because I didn't think that he always saw the

kids all that much to really make a statement about that as much. So that's where we had some differences.

At first, Chris was worried because David's teaching schedule would not allow him to observe the stated focus of the growth plans, the fourth grade classes. Chris suspected that David, like Al, would drop by on occasion to observe him and form inaccurate understandings of what he was trying to accomplish. Although David could not observe the fourth grade classes, for the first several months he did observe Chris weekly, despite his own concern that he could not continue all year to "spend every free moment" with Chris. As Chris began to trust David to be reasonable, he became more confident that they would be able to work together. Had Al continued as supervisor for Chris' third year, it is less likely that Chris would have developed adequate skills to be retained. Chris contrasted the help with lesson planning he received from Al with his work with David.

I was giving [Al] some of my lesson plans, but I wasn't getting a lot of feedback on them at all. It was just like, "Oh you did the lesson plans." And what I started doing with David was instead of bringing them into the office I just emailed them to him. . . . If he had something to comment on he'd just copy that part out and put it in bold some different comments like, "Oh, maybe you should try this instead or maybe should put these." And that was kind of helpful to know that, ok, this looks good, this is solid. Just getting some of that feedback helped me to see, "Okay that's good." Or just to get some ideas."

An additional important factor was David's concern about not overwhelming Chris with too many different suggestions, to "simplify things for him and then build on that success." Chris was understandably concerned about all the disparate and sometimes unclear goals in the written growth plans, in addition to all the other suggestions Al had given him. While some novices may be able to sort through a large number of random suggestions and select those that will make a difference, David's incremental approach was more appropriate for Chris' own style. David was diligent in his pursuit of the core issues until he finally identified Chris' lack of clear goals for his elementary orchestra's sound and knowledge of appropriate repertoire, and did not know how to "check for understanding." Once David isolated those major gaps in Chris' pedagogical knowledge, they could work together to develop the pedagogical skills to work towards those goals. David's approach matched well the step-by-step approach that Chris wanted to use with his own students.

I guess the rule that I try to remember—if you tell them to fix one thing, that's *all* that you can tell them to fix. Because if you try to get them to fix too many things at once, you might as well have not told them anything, because they're not going to be able to remember it all *and* be able to be play. So just try to work on one thing at a time, so if you see a student that's got three or four things wrong, one day say, "Let's get the thumb right," and the next day work on the wrist. That's kind of how I approach it.

David's approach helped Chris clear away the fog of not knowing and "put [basic] things in place" so he could "start refining them."

### Summary

Chris' misunderstandings of curriculum- and lesson-planning processes were so entangled that it is difficult to ascertain whether some other interventions might have made a difference earlier. I asked Chris what made things begin to come together for him, and he articulated his understandings of how the gaps in his pedagogical knowledge began to be filled.

The things that were kind of missing, between you *and* David both, kind of started getting mentioned and getting fixed, as far as just formalizing what I was doing. I think [David] just kind of helped me refine some things that I was already doing. . . . I just probably wasn't doing well with them because I didn't realize how to attack it. From the two of you, I just got more ideas of things to go with and things to just try out, where I don't know if I had as many of those ideas before. Because, honestly, I was just trying to come up with ideas to just get from day one to day two, you know. But there was a lot more things that I was able to try out and see how I liked them.

Whatever combination of factors allowed Chris to finally understand "what [he] needed to do," David's speculation the previous summer, that perhaps Chris "didn't know what he wanted," proved to be an important insight. Chris articulated that same understanding about a month after the day that seemed to be a turning point, as he showed me his lesson plan for the class I had just observed.

For me, like I said, sometimes I write lessons plans that are as long as this, sometimes shorter. But the main thing that for me is important is that I know *what* I'm trying to get the kids to do. Because then I'm constantly asking myself through the lesson, are they getting it? Are they getting what I'm trying to get? And that usually helps me make the

proper adjustments so I'm not just following a script, but I'm *really* having a bit more ownership over what's going on.

Another contributing factor may have been that Chris, like other novices, had difficulty focusing simultaneously on multiple aspects of classroom instruction (Berliner, 1995), complicated by Schön's (1987) beginner's paradox of needing to acquire experience before he could understand "what he needed to do." In the case of the Musette, Chris was initially unable to analyze at the same time the technical, rhythmic, and note-reading skills required, or to combine that knowledge with the skills brought by the seven students in that particular class. He had, in his mind, good reasons for selecting the piece as a "concert song" and, until David suggested it, had not really considered the possibility of selecting alternate repertoire. At the end of the year, he reflected back on some of the things he had learned. With his fourth grade curriculum more clear in his mind, he was getting ready to plan a curriculum for the fifth and sixth graders.

I guess I always have trouble with how fast to take off on some of those skills in fifth and sixth grade. And I think I have *some* understanding of why. Because I started last year with songs like Musette. And for me, I look at it as, "Well, this is pretty scalar and it works pretty well." But I guess what *I* wasn't really thinking about was they're used to going up the scale and then down, and that one starts [*he sings the opening measures of the song*]. And you've got half notes and eighth notes and I think it was just a little too much to mix up all that. Plus the fact that a lot of times I get new students in fifth grade. For whatever reason, Chris lacked the necessary pedagogical knowledge as a new teacher to understand what he now understood. That he could so clearly articulate the technical challenges in a sixteen-measure song at the end of the year illuminates both his early confusion and his ultimate growth. He was quite likely helped in his growth by David's consistent willingness and availability to help him make sense of his teaching experiences, even as he was acquiring them.

In his early attempts to meet the third growth plan, "develop and maintain a specific written log for each student's progress," Chris marked points in his grade book to record each student's daily behavior and attendance with instrument, music, and pencil. Later in the year, trying to do what he thought Al wanted, he developed an elaborate check list to assess students' performance skills, which he decided was thorough, but time-consuming to administer. He then developed a system that was "a little bit quicker." As his pedagogical skills grew, he became

concerned to use the rubric, not just something to help him assign a grade, but as a tool for the students' learning. The following year, he planned to make the “playing checks” more “meaningful” for the students, not just handing them a paper marked with points, but “letting them know, ‘If most of your points that you missed are with left hand, these are the things you should be working on.’” He had even extended his understanding of assessment beyond formal testing and recording of points to a focus on individual students' learning. He recognized that he could use his lesson plan book, as well as his grade book, to track progress. By the end of the study, Chris was planning a way to record more information in his grade book, in his plan book, and in the computer for student report cards.

I think what [David] wants to see more of is keeping this type of stuff, where I was marking down, OK, they did these songs today. [*Chris showed me his plan book.*] I think he was looking for me to write a little more like I did here, OK, Dominic's on the first line and I need to work on this note and I need to work on all these things. And so, I think he was looking for more things like this, where I was actually marking individual students' progress.

Chris' progress toward the growth plan goal of assessing students' progress tracks his growth incorporating our suggestions into his own teaching style, as well as his ability to move beyond the teacher behavior to an understanding of what was good for students. At the end of the year, while David recommended specific steps for Chris' continued improvement, he felt confident that Chris' progress was solid enough to merit tenure in the district, and was relieved to have had a part in helping a struggling young teacher “make it.”

#### Implications for Practice

This study raises more questions than answers. Berliner (1988) wrote that “many who have accumulated years of relevant experience seem not to have profited from it” (p. 81). Chris had difficulty learning from his first two years of teaching experience, but there is no easy explanation for his problems. I have attempted to articulate some of the many complexities of the challenges Chris faced in learning to teach, as well as the challenges for his mentors in finding ways to help him. Chris was able to improve his teaching to a very respectable level, but it took intensive effort and time on everyone's part, including Chris' own. My findings suggest four approaches that may make a difference for struggling novices: investing time, acknowledging

advice-filtering processes, broadening conceptions of pedagogical knowledge, and developing a pedagogy of mentoring.

David and I spent countless hours observing, listening to, and talking with Chris. Such a substantial investment of time appears especially important for two reasons. First, it allowed us to diagnose and address Chris' real questions. Chris' pedagogical confusion manifested itself in an unusual pedagogical vocabulary, making it challenging to follow his thought processes. From the beginning, David made a concerted effort to understand Chris, brainstorming possible explanations for the behaviors he observed, and persisting until he identified some key gaps in Chris' understanding. We both made an attempt to "give reason" to Chris' thoughts and actions.

Our first obligation as educators . . . is to ask how we can construe the error we just heard a student make as intrinsically reasonable. What must be going on in the mind of the learner to make the apparent error we have just observed seem reasonable to that learner? We give the student reason when we treat his response with that kind of respect.

(Shulman, 1988, p. 34).

Our investment of time was important for a second reason. Abell, et al. (1995) found that a relationship of trust and respect had to be established before a novice would consider advice about teaching from an assigned mentor in a non-evaluative role. Such a relationship may be even more important for advice to be accepted as useful when, like Al and David, the person offering it is in an evaluative position. Chris recognized that he needed help, but he also was motivated to respond because he trusted that David, unlike Al, had observed enough of his teaching to be able to make a fair judgment about his work. For Chris, Al, David, and me, it was immaterial whether Chris was not taught the missing concepts, did not hear what was taught, or heard it but discounted it as useless at the time. What ultimately mattered was that David did not give up, but kept looking for such a basic gap in Chris' pedagogical knowledge until it was identified.

Mentors are often puzzled, as were Al, David, and I, by the mysterious processes that influenced what Chris heard of the advice we thought we offered, and how he processed and implemented it. This study's findings support others (e.g., Abell, et al., 1995; Bullough, Knowles, & Crow, 1991; Ferguson, 2003; Holt-Reynolds, 1994; Schmidt, 1998) documenting the individual ways that novices receive and process advice from mentors. We could have perhaps helped Chris sooner had we acknowledged right away the existence of that filtering

process. In our work with beginning teachers, we can admit up front that there is no direct causal relationship between our teaching and their learning (Fenstermacher, 1986). We can offer advice, but we must acknowledge that each novice hears through the filter of his or her own prior beliefs and experiences and then determines how and whether to apply that advice. Perhaps we will spend less time being perplexed by struggling novices' choices if we immediately seek to “give reason” to their unexpected decisions, rather than lamenting their lack of skill.

Chris' filtering process was different than the experience-based processes documented by the studies in the previous paragraph. His learning appeared to be impeded less by established beliefs than by his general confusion and a lack of articulated beliefs. David and I both approached our work with Chris from a belief that Chris needed to develop approaches to pedagogical knowledge that would help him articulate the “whys” of his pedagogical choices. This contrasted with Al's more technocratic view of pedagogical knowledge, which focused more on the “hows” of teaching. It is likely that, in this case, the fact that David, Al, and I were all string specialists helped provide Chris with the detailed pedagogical knowledge he needed to structure his pedagogical understandings and practices. However, Chris probably understood Al's suggestions for instructional techniques as isolated bits of information, contributing to his inappropriately applications of that advice. Once Chris developed a framework of basic concepts into which he could integrate suggestions for specific teaching techniques, he could better understand when and why to apply them. This supports Franke and Dahlgren's (1996) finding that differing conceptions of the mentor's role and of how teachers' knowledge is acquired affected the effectiveness of mentor-mentee relationships.

In analyzing this study's data, I was struck by the ways that we, as mentors, often seem to forget the very principles of education we advocate that novices use with their students. Nearly all novices feel uncertainty and need reassurance (Abell, et al, 1995), and the problem may be more acute for those who are struggling (Schmidt & Knowles, 1994). In hurried supervisory conversations, in our rush to tell them what to fix, we need to make sure that they are aware of what *did* go well, to help them develop confidence in their pedagogical choices. Because so much of Chris' early teaching experience was obscured by the fog of his confusion, he especially found it “helpful to know that, ok, this looks good, this is solid.” Particularly in the case of struggling novices, we may often “ignore or forget Maslow's hierarchy and focus solely on the growth rather than the deficiency needs of teachers” (Goddard & Foster, 2001, 7.5). David was

one of the few district supervisors I have known who actually invested the time to identify and remediate Chris' "deficiency needs," not only giving specific advice, but helping Chris develop a pedagogical framework. He then helped Chris refine those larger concepts by developing, not just specific pedagogical strategies, but the skills to know how and when to apply them (Bruner, 1960/1977) through regular and frequent observations to check for understanding and to remediate if necessary. Conducting and string teaching pedagogue Elizabeth Green is reported to have often reminded young teachers that "telling isn't teaching." The contrast between Al's and David's approaches highlighted for me how often we rely on "telling" to "fix" novice's problems. We often forget that novices, although adults, are beginners in their field, and may need as much nurturing, feedback, and practice as do beginning instrumentalists. It is important that we remind ourselves that teaching is an extremely complex activity, a performing art (Paul, 1994) that requires years of practice to develop an expert's ability to focus on its multiple dimensions simultaneously (Berliner, 1995).

#### Recommendations for Further Research

Research has identified problems that are common to many novices (Conway, 2003; DeLorenzo, 1992; Haack, 2003; Krueger, 1996). However, each novice configures his or her own problems, not in a tidy checklist of concerns that can be identified and addressed one by one, but in a complex, unique constellation. The challenges involved in working with this one novice teacher are magnified for mentors working with other novices who exhibit never-ending combinations of skill sets, goals, and interpersonal styles. Teacher educators are perennially perplexed by beginners who seem to ignore or not apply advice offered by others (Dewey, 1938/1963; Holt-Reynolds, 1994). A greater body of research that allows struggling novices' own voices to be heard (Bresler, 1995; Nierman, et al., 2002) may add to our understanding of their experiences of confusion. While each mentoring relationship has unique features, such studies may help the profession begin to formulate a pedagogy of mentoring to provide a greater repertoire of strategies that may assist us in helping beginners succeed.

Continued research into the relationship between teaching experience and various aspects of pedagogical knowledge may provide insights for teacher educators to better assist novices, particularly those who, like Chris, had such difficulty in framing problems that he initially did not know how to seek help (Dewey, 1910/1933; Schön, 1987). Chris benefited from working with supervisors and mentors who were string specialists; mentors with less specific pedagogical



knowledge may not have been as successful in helping him. Additional research about beginning teachers' struggles to develop pedagogical knowledge may ultimately increase the profession's understanding of effective preparation, induction, and retention of novice teachers.

Each mentoring relationship, whether mandated or voluntary, appears to be uniquely negotiated by the people in that relationship (Abell, et al., 1995). Both novices and mentors are challenged to find, for each person, the right balance of freedom to experiment with observation, feedback, reinforcement, and suggestions for improvement. Therefore, more qualitative studies of individual mentoring relationships may provide an important supplement to studies that examine broad trends. Such studies may provide supervisors, mentors, and teacher educators with greater understanding of possible combinations of factors that contribute to successful or failed relationships. A serendipitous feature of this study was the support that David and I provided for each other; further studies could explore the value of shared mentoring relationships and other supports for mentors themselves.

Chris could easily have left or been forced out of the profession. Although David, Al, and I each contributed to Chris' success, he himself deserves the largest share of the credit. Unlike novices in stories of failure (e.g., Knowles & Hoefler, 1989; O'Sullivan, 1989; Schmidt & Knowles, 1995), Chris never lost his confidence that he could become a good teacher. He demonstrated incredible persistence in the face of some very negative experiences. He was often uncertain "what they [were] looking for" as signs of improvement in his teaching, and that uncertainty, combined with his own vague ideas about the teacher he wanted to become, sometimes seemed to make his fog murkier. Chris persisted in sorting through all the advice offered to him and, with help from a variety of sources, set his own step-by-step goals for improvement. He has continued that desire to improve through his fourth year of teaching and into his fifth. Further research about elements that contribute to individual success may suggest ways to better support novices and preservice teachers, especially those who seem so confused that we are not sure where to begin or how to help.

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