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Principals with Music Teaching Backgrounds: Interactions with the School Music Program

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore the perspectives of public school principals who began their careers as music teachers. Five principals who formerly worked as music teachers were interviewed about their interactions with music teacher employees, their approaches to professional development, and their music program advocacy. Approaching the topic from the perspectives of musician-administrators was a helpful way to gain insight into common areas of miscommunication between music teachers and principals. Themes included diplomatic relationships, principals' sense of belonging to the music world and sense of readiness for administrative work, and internal advocacy. Implications included the need for increased music program advocacy to other members of the school teaching staff.

Keywords: principal, advocacy, lifelong music participation, workplace relationships

Introduction

Principals develop school working environments by forming relationships with teaching staff. No known research has been conducted from the perspectives of principals on how their teaching backgrounds impact their working relationships with teachers. For example, a principal with little to no background in music may promote music program goals differently than a principal who began their career as a music teacher. Music teachers are particularly dependent on interactions with administrators, because music is an elective subject with community presence and longevity in students' lives (Abril & Bannerman, 2015). Despite the importance of productive relationships with principals to music teachers' success, music education researchers have rarely discussed interactions between music teachers and principals from the principals' point of view. In order to expand the scholarly conversation about how principals interact with music teachers, this study ad-

dressed the influence of music teaching backgrounds on administrators' experiences with the music programs in their schools.

Review of Literature

Abril and Gault (2006, 2008) conducted seminal surveys on how principals perceive school music programs. They asked elementary and secondary principals to share their ideal music learning outcomes and educational goals and to list the factors that affect music education in schools. According to their findings, principals were in favor of increasing both the variety of music offerings and the number of cross-curricular lessons taught in music classrooms. Additionally, principals were aware of the budgeting and scheduling conflicts that music teachers face. Abril and Bannerman (2015) found that elementary music teachers rated principal support as highly influential to the school music program.

As reflected by the above studies, a productive working relationship between principals and music teachers is necessary for a healthy music program, just as clear communication with principals can enhance the success of any school program. Researchers in education have explored the impact of principals' communication practices on teachers' job satisfaction (Griffith, 2003; Shen et al., 2012), relationships with students (Elstad, 2008; Gigante & Firestone, 2007) and emotional distress (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018). Hollingworth et al. (2018) recommended that principals have an open-door policy when communicating with teachers, and should be both active in professional development events and visible around the school. Music education researchers have examined the impact of principals upon the success of elementary, middle, and high school music programs as well as on the job satisfaction of the music teacher (Baker, 2007; McLain, 2005). Principals have described themselves as one piece of a puzzle that encourages musical growth throughout their school district along with music teachers, students, parents, the school board, and the community (Fulbright & Deasy, 1999; Halawah, 2005; Petersen, 2019). Music teachers have also shared various stories about successful or unsuccessful communication with principals especially when principals are the go-between with parents (Butt & Retallick, 2002) and when music teachers are in the first year of their careers (Barnes, 2010). Overall, successful communication between principals and music teachers influences music program scheduling, budgeting, and community support as well as the novice music teacher's personal growth (Abril & Bannerman, 2015; Barnes, 2010).

Researchers have also explored how principals advocate for music programs (Abril & Bannerman, 2015; Miksza, 2013; Whitaker, 1998). Miksza (2013)

found that principals' support for music programs, in particular principal attendance at elementary music concerts, had a significant effect on resources available for the music program. Whitaker (1998) examined two music programs in urban schools and observed that the administrators had the option of allocating finances to revitalize lapsed music offerings. Financial decisions can especially impact the efficacy of music programs given that instrument purchases and decisions to go to festivals influence student participation and engagement. Principals can advocate for music by distributing resources and providing an administrative presence at music events.

The main body of research regarding the impact of principals on music programs has focused on teacher evaluation, mentorship, and professional development opportunities. Researchers have made specific recommendations about adjusting teacher evaluation models to suit music classrooms, though no known research has dealt with the implementation of these adjustments (Arneson, 2015; Maranzano, 2000; Overland, 2014; Robinson, 2019). Edgar (2012) explored the process for music teacher evaluation by examining how principals evaluated first-year music teachers in four high schools. One of the principals in Edgar's study was a former band director, and this principal was a strong advocate for the music program and even helped with lesson planning. Overall, Edgar recommended that principals develop their understanding of arts teachers' perspectives, have regular meetings with arts teachers, include subject-specific elements in evaluations, and develop strong communication of their expectations.

Another way in which principals can enhance the working environment of music teachers is through their approach to mentoring. School principals are rarely involved directly in music teacher mentorship (Conway, 2001), and music teachers have expressed the need for more specific, music-related advice (Conway, 2003; Conway & Zerman, 2004). Many researchers have examined available mentoring experiences for new teachers (Benson, 2008; Berg & Conway, 2020; Blair, 2008; Conway, 2006, 2015; Gallo, 2018), and for mid- to late-career music teachers (Conway & Holcomb, 2008). Bell-Robertson (2015) and Jacobs (2008) presented methods to rectify some inconsistencies in mentor selection and training. New music teachers may experience less mentoring support than core teachers because of the specialized nature of the subject (Gallo, 2018) and due to their isolation as the only music teacher in a school building (Benson, 2008; Blair, 2008; Sindberg, 2011). In addition to further mentoring opportunities, the general need for professional development specifically related to fine arts subjects was expressed in several sources cited in Conway et al.'s (2005) literature review. Music teachers desired professional development in both teaching-related and music-related top-

ics, and there was also an interest in finding ways to adjust common professional development topics for use in the music classroom (Conway et al., 2005; Eros, 2012; Shaw, 2020; Stanley et al., 2014). It may be interesting to see how principals with music backgrounds approach professional development for music teacher employees given the perceived lack of music-specific opportunities.

A principal with a music background might spend extra time and resources supporting the music program (Conway & Hibbard, 2018; Edgar, 2012). Conway & Hibbard (2018) interviewed four music teachers and their school principals about navigating the micropolitical landscape. One of the principals was a former music teacher, and this principal demonstrated extensive support of their music teacher employee during a curriculum reform initiative despite opposition from the superintendent. This particular principal may have utilized their music knowledge to see how the curriculum reform was applicable to the music program. Conway & Hibbard's focus was not on the principals' specific motivations, so there might have been a variety of reasons for the principal's support. Regardless, a music background would likely enable school principals to understand the curricular goals of their music teacher employees.

Purpose

Known research regarding principals' attitudes toward music programs includes topics such as teacher evaluation, mentorship, and professional development. However, more research from the principals' perspectives is needed to fully understand these interactions and their impact. Russell (2012) surveyed 321 music teachers and indicated that 3.6% would leave music education to become administrators within the next 5 years. Russell wrote that this small percentage of musician-administrators would assist music teacher employees in developing their curricula.

Accordingly, the purpose of this instrumental case study was to conduct an in-depth exploration of the experiences of principals who formerly worked as music educators. A secondary purpose was to isolate the suggestions of musician-administrators on how they might best support music programs. Research questions included: 1) How do principals with music backgrounds describe their interactions with music teacher employees?, 2) How have principals' prior experiences as music teachers informed their advising and training efforts with music teacher employees?, and 3) How have principals' prior experiences as music teachers informed their advocacy efforts for school music programs?

Method

I employed an instrumental case study design to explore the perspectives of school principals with music teaching backgrounds. An instrumental case study provides insight into an issue, and the case is of secondary interest (Stake, 2005). In this study, I focused on the issue of how possession of a musical background would influence the interactions between principals and the school music program. This issue has applications for how current school principals and music teachers communicate and work together and for all principals in understanding potential impacts of their teaching backgrounds. While the individual life story of each principal was not the main focus of the study, their backgrounds were key to providing a "vehicle to better understand the issue" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was bounded by the number of principals who participated (five) over the course of one fall semester.

Participants

The participants in the study were five school principals who formerly worked as public school music teachers. I set a predetermined description of principals who had taught any grade level of music for at least 5 years and who had at least 1 full year of administrative experience. I used purposeful sampling to choose participants who were most able to "inform the researcher about the research problem under examination" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 148). In order to identify more potential participants, I asked fellow music educators to recommend principals. Four of my colleagues recommended participants and provided an emailed introduction to connect me with the participant. In one case, a principal participating in the study recommended another participant. At the time of the study, three principals were employed in Ohio, one in Connecticut, and one in Maryland. Table 1 further describes the participants' music and administrative experience. The names of all participants have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Table 1

Participant Information

Name	Location	Administration Experience	Years of Administration	Music Teaching Experience	Years of Music Teaching
Brandon	Ohio	Grade 6-8	7	Grade 6-8 band	7
Chris	Ohio	Grade 6-8	6	Grade 5-6 band, Grade 9-12 band	9
Diana	Maryland	Grade K-5	2	Grade 3-8 band and orchestra	11
Olivia	Connecticut	Grade 9-12	20	Grade 9-12 band, Grade 5-8 choir	5
Paul	Ohio	Grade 9-12	22	Grade K-12 general music and band, Grade 6-8 choir	7

Data Collection

Interviews were the main form of data collection in this study. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed time for in-depth discussion. Each principal completed three interviews focused on specific topics. The first interview included conversations about the principal's career and common interactions with music teacher employees. The second interview regarded professional development for music teacher employees. The third interview concentrated on music advocacy and included questions about the principals' goals for their school music programs. The three overarching topics of interaction (Abril & Bannerman, 2015; Barnes, 2010), professional development (Conway et al., 2005; Eros, 2012; Shaw, 2020), and advocacy (Fulbright & Deasy, 1999; Miksza, 2013) were subjects commonly discussed in prior research.

All 15 interviews took place during Fall 2019 and ranged between 25 and 50 minutes. The interviews with each principal were scheduled 1 to 2 weeks apart, which allowed time to plan follow-up questions. The first interview with each of the three Ohio principals was conducted in person, and all other interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom or Skype. In-person interviews are ideal for the rapport of the interviewer and interviewee, but some virtual interviews were necessary due to location.

Information on each school's website about the school's current music program provided a secondary data source. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discussed data collection via popular culture documents, including public webpages, as a way

to "augment an interview study" (p. 168). The five schools where the principals worked all had music classroom websites which included music teacher biographies, music program handbooks, music standards, and events calendars. Three school websites had letters to the public about the value of music education.

Data Analysis

I audio-recorded and transcribed each interview by hand and then sent the transcription to the participant for verification. Each participant responded by either approving the transcript or by providing clarifications. For example, two participants added stories from their early years of music teaching in order to convey how their previous experiences made them empathetic to the needs of their current music employees. I analyzed each interview separately using within-case analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and highlighted main ideas using descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016). In the second stage, I used cross-case analysis to compare all the interviews for similarities and differences in codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Codes that were apparent in three or more of the interviews were combined into overarching themes using structural coding (Saldaña, 2016). The four resulting themes are described in the Findings section.

Trustworthiness

In the interest of reporting any subjectivities, I identify as a white, female music educator with several years of experience teaching middle and high school band. I have developed an interest in the working relationships between administrators and music teachers through the aforementioned teaching experience. In particular, my perspective on this topic may have been influenced by a positive experience early in my teaching career, when I worked with a principal who demonstrated deep interest in the objectives and day-to-day operation of the music program. I tend to view school principals as valuable resources in music educator development, and since the participants in the current study were former music educators, I also perceived them as colleagues.

I employed several strategies to limit bias in the results. All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms and any other identifying information has been removed from the data reported. Interview transcripts were sent to the relevant participant for member checking. In addition, two peer reviewers with experience conducting and analyzing qualitative research reviewed the data and potential themes. One peer reviewer provided examples of descriptive and structural coding which helped to clarify the procedures of each stage of coding. A second peer reviewer analyzed the codes and themes drawn from data in order to check

for neglected themes or a lack of clarity in the explanation of the themes. The second reviewer's analysis encouraged me to pursue a larger-picture view by pointing out the similarities between some of the codes.

Findings

Four themes emerged during data analysis. The first theme, Diplomacy, was derived from stories of how the principals balanced their own music teaching experience with allowing their music teacher employees the autonomy to run the school music program. The second theme, Sense of Belonging, was demonstrated by principals who actively participated in music whether they had moved into administrative roles recently or many years ago. The third theme, Sense of Readiness, was identified when principals showed pride in their musical backgrounds' relevance to administrative work. The fourth theme, Internal Advocacy, was drawn from the combined actions of the principals to support music teachers within the school building, either by organizing applicable professional development opportunities or by advocating for the music program to teachers of non-music subjects. These four themes are explained in detail in the following section.

Theme 1: Diplomacy

The principals recognized that their own music backgrounds gave them unique perspectives which could influence their interactions with their music teacher employees. Brandon, Chris, Olivia, and Paul discussed how their knowledge of music could be uncomfortable for their music teacher employees. As Paul described, "They also know that they can't pull the wool over my eyes...they know I'll ask the tough questions...they know they can't skirt around the issue because I've lived it." The principals felt that music teachers were unaccustomed to working with administrators who understood music education practices and goals. Brandon explained, "I think music educators get comfortable with nobody really knowing what they're doing. And there's comfort in the autonomy." Olivia agreed that the music teachers in her school experienced a different level of anxiety when being evaluated by a principal with a music background but also suggested that this same nervousness could be felt by any teacher who was being evaluated by someone with experience in their subject.

The principals utilized their knowledge of music in different ways when communicating with their music teacher employees. Brandon and Diana adopted a hands-off approach out of concern that their music employees might feel less freedom to structure their own music program. Brandon said, "They know my

background and I don't want them thinking that I'm trying to micromanage their work." Diana recognized that the high standards in music departments she had previously worked in might cause her to have impractical expectations for the success of the music program in her current Title I school. Diana talked about how she communicated with the music teachers through asking questions in order to avoid imposing her own preconceived notions on the music teachers. Alternatively, Olivia, a professional with 20 years of administrative experience, talked about finding a point of agreement between her current music teacher employees' strategies and her own music-teaching experience. She said, "I have in observations pushed them on a couple things that are based on my own philosophy...That's what I want for kids, I want them to be able to be independent with their instrument and their music." The principals' music teaching experiences were shared to varying degrees with music teacher employees, but the employees were all aware of their principals' music backgrounds.

One of the codes that appeared multiple times in the principals' interviews was "non-music advice." Despite their musical knowledge, none of the principals shared stories about giving subject-specific advice to their music teacher employees. Brandon and Paul clarified that their music teacher employees did not need music-related pedagogical assistance. When describing the middle school band director, Brandon stated, "We have high-quality educators here. She doesn't need me." Paul spoke about focusing on instructional strategies rather than music-related advice during teacher evaluations. Paul and Diana both related that no music teacher employee had asked them for subject-specific advice. More often, the advice the principals related sharing was concerned with logistics or classroom management. Chris spoke about helping a choir director raise the interest level of eighth-grade students who became unruly during the last period of the school day. Olivia's music teacher employee had asked her for advice regarding music students' behavior while sitting in the audience at a concert awaiting their turn to perform. The principals' diplomacy was their guiding point in relating to the music teacher, and despite their musical knowledge, their interactions with music teachers in terms of evaluation and advice were related to teaching skills rather than subject-specific skills.

Theme 2: Sense of Belonging

All five principals shared stories about regularly visiting the music department outside of official teacher evaluations, showing a nostalgic tendency to hang around the music classrooms. Chris spoke about his casual visits to the band room and said, "I was a band person, and so sometimes I will go in there just to relive

that experience." Each principal provided examples of their continued participation in the music program ranging from conducting a piece at a concert, to acting as a guest adjudicator to help prepare their music departments for contest, to pulling out their instrument and playing with a class or joining the choir class in singing warm-ups. As Diana said, "I try to give them their own space too...but I do want to be part of it." Brandon and Olivia enjoyed using music as a way to connect with students in the school. As Brandon related, "What's always fun is going in and playing with the kids...Because they don't all know that I can do that, so that's really fun, a good relationship piece for kids." Olivia said that sitting in with a choir rehearsal was, "Just to kind of let them know that I'm one of them, so to speak." Olivia used the phrase "one of them" several times, demonstrating her continued identity as a musician and music teacher.

Brandon, Chris, and Paul also felt a continued sense of belonging to the music department through their children's participation in music. Paul, whose three children all played Paul's main instrument in band, related a story about a middle school band night where the parents performed alongside their children. "I was like the ringer...I don't need to practice, just give me the horn...So it was kind of neat to be able to do that in front of my daughter." For Brandon, encouraging his own children and the students in his school to participate in music was part of his ideology. He said, "I have core values in raising my own children of 'you must play an instrument'...philosophically I believe that's important...every kid should play an instrument...I believe strongly that good musicians make good people." Brandon, Chris, and Paul often took part in musical activities with their children both inside and outside of school. Whether applying musical abilities to their interactions with music students or with their children at home, each principal demonstrated an enduring sense of belonging to the music world.

Theme 3: Sense of Readiness

Brandon, Diana, and Olivia specifically commented that the skills they learned as music teachers helped them to respond to the demands of the administrator's job. As Diana explained, "As a band director I was used to building community, large events, big picture sort of thing, so I was able to bridge and take those skills with me into the administrative world." Olivia agreed that the ability to manage and communicate with large groups proved useful in her role as a principal: "My philosophy on what a performance should look like, how we should behave, that certainly has helped me...I have no problem getting the whole school together, and sharing information that needs to be shared...it prepared me well." Diana and Brandon both described the unique perspective they possessed as former music

educators. Brandon said, "Having been a music educator presents you with pedagogical skills that are beyond average." These three principals demonstrated pride in applying skills learned in their music teaching careers to their current administrative work.

Theme 4: Internal Advocacy

Internal advocacy was an emergent theme in which the principals seemed to spend more time advocating for the music program to the other teachers in the school rather than to external entities, such as the school board or parents. The theme was apparent whether the principals were speaking from their previous careers as music educators or sharing stories from their current positions. Chris and Diana had personal experience with music programs at the elementary and middle school levels that were "pull-out" programs, where music students were pulled out of other classes throughout the day in order to have music class in small groups or to have individual music lessons. In their experience, the other teachers in the school showed varying levels of support and sometimes refused to send students to the music classroom altogether. In their current schools, the principals had clarified expectations so that teachers would allow students to attend music classes and music activities such as concert dress rehearsals. As Chris described,

> *It was me kind of putting my foot down...this is the only time they have to be able to do this together before a performance...people did it, they may not have liked it, but they agreed to it.*

Olivia faced not only the challenge of internal advocacy but the added stigma that she was supporting the music program more than other programs. She said,

> *Earlier in my career as a principal, people were complaining about all the kids being pulled out of classes for performances...there was, I think, a belief that I was supporting it because I was one of them, because I was a music person.*

The principals agreed that they had the duty to provide equal support to all the school's programs. Paul looked for fair ways to promote the music program and encouraged his music teachers to communicate with other teachers as soon and as politely as possible when preparing to pull students from other classes.

In their music teaching careers, the five principals had experienced feelings of isolation as the only music teacher in a school and of not having many music coworkers with whom to share ideas. Additionally, Chris had experienced a lack of financial support to attend music education conferences including having to pay for his own substitute. Because of these prior experiences, the principals found

ways to advocate for their music teacher employees through providing musically-relevant professional development opportunities. They recognized that the professional development activities scheduled for the whole school were not always as easily applied to the music classroom as to core academic classrooms. The principals gave varying suggestions on how to create professional development opportunities that music teachers could benefit from. Olivia and Paul both encouraged their music teachers to visit other schools in order to observe other music teachers. Diana advocated for bringing in "resource teachers" who had experience in specific content areas in order for the music teacher to receive support from musically-knowledgeable people. The principals all supported their music teachers' attendance at the state music educator conferences. Brandon, Chris, Olivia, and Paul discussed the financial requirements of supporting professional development opportunities for their music teacher employees, and they were willing to hire substitute teachers and approve travel and registration funding requests. The principals regularly advocated for their music teacher and music program offerings within the school through conversations with non-music teachers and through professional development opportunities.

Discussion

The principals supported the school music programs to a great extent but also had high expectations for their music teacher employees. Paul's quote about music teachers knowing that they couldn't "pull the wool" over his eyes suggested that the level of accountability is raised for a music teacher with a knowledgeable evaluator. Principals' descriptions of their working relationships with music teachers included a focus on being fair-minded, communicative, and reliant on the music teacher employee's skills. None of the principals saw themselves as a source of music-related advice although they all recognized their personal music teaching perspectives. One reason for the principals' lack of involvement in the music curriculum might be that the music teachers in their schools were relatively experienced as opposed to the first-year music teacher in Edgar's (2012) study whose principal assisted with lesson planning.

Music teachers in prior studies expressed their desire for more music-related advice (Conway, 2003; Conway & Zerman, 2004) and while the principals in this study did not discuss providing that advice, they did suggest multiple forms of music-related professional development. These ideas were supported by Baker (2007) and Eros (2012), who wrote that conversing with music teacher colleagues was among the most valued forms of professional development. Because this study focused on the perspectives of principals, it is unknown whether their music teacher

employees would have asked for both teaching-related and music-related professional development as found by Conway et al. (2005). However, given that the principals primarily reported conversations focused on non-musical topics, it is likely that music-specific professional development would be only one of many useful modes of training for music teachers.

Participation in music rehearsal and performance with students in the school and family members were examples of the principals' enduring sense of belonging to the music world. Prior researchers have noted that the role of a school principal is complex and that principals can have difficulty letting go of the classroom (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Stone-Johnson, 2014). The musician-administrators in this study continued to participate in the classroom, though unlike the principals in Browne-Ferrigno (2003), they continued to do so years after they had become principals. In addition, the principals expressed pride in the skills they had developed as music teachers and spoke about the transferability of those skills to administrative work. Some of the mid-career teachers interviewed in Stone-Johnson (2014) were less confident in their ability to successfully handle the duties of a school principal, and it is possible that music teachers have developed skills that are well-suited to administrative positions.

The theme of internal advocacy emerged as a combination of the principals' prior struggles as music teachers and their efforts in their current positions. Lack of support for music activities from other teachers was mentioned by Abril and Bannerman (2015) and could be a familiar experience for music teachers. However, it was surprising to note that the administrators felt pressed to explain the value of music education to their staff rather than to board members with financial concerns or to parents with grading and course credit questions.

Implications for Music Educators

There are multiple benefits for music teachers working with a principal with a music background. These benefits include the ability to cultivate a closer working relationship and a potentially higher level of advocacy for music in the school. However, music teachers can also work to generate a similarly productive relationship with principals who do not have a music background. Professional development that is applicable to music classrooms can be explained and suggested to non-music administrators. The music teacher can invite a principal into the classroom as a participant in rehearsal or as a guest adjudicator. Also, the classroom management-related questions that the principals remembered answering could be discussed with a principal of any background.

Given the theme of internal advocacy, music teachers likely need to spend more time discussing the value of music education with their colleagues. Music teachers might build internal support through cross-curricular projects and by showing respect for other teachers' classroom time. Music teachers can invite other teachers and their classrooms to participate in music rehearsals and performances. Music teacher educators at the university level could encourage preservice music teachers to develop a working relationship with their school principal and with their fellow teachers in order to increase the support and comfort level music teachers experience in their first position. Lastly, music teachers who are in the process of becoming administrators should consider their approach to music program support and reflect on how they might encourage music teacher employees to share the advocacy workload.

In order to further examine the relationships between principals and music teachers, future researchers might collect the joint perspectives of music teachers and principals or compare reactions to music program scenarios from principals with and without music backgrounds. A model of effective communication practices between principals and music teachers also may be developed through future research. Most importantly, future researchers could closely examine the working relationships of principals and first-year music teachers, as less experienced teachers can benefit a great deal from mentoring relationships that help them feel connected to the school community. Hopefully, continuing to explore the viewpoints of both music teachers and principals will lead to further understanding of how music teachers may best communicate music program goals to their principals and other school leaders, and help prepare future music teachers to cultivate productive relationships with their principals.

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