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CONTEMPLATIONS ON MUSIC EDUCATION
On the Value of Research and Community, or What Good Does Research Do?

Addressing questions of interest through research is assumed to contribute to changes that lead to improvement in the human condition. Most music teacher educators have experienced elation in reading or talking with others interested in similar questions as well as frustration with a lack of time to enjoy exploring those questions. From the pressure of this apparent treadmill, it is tempting to ask what is the point? Can a few research studies really make a difference? Dr. Margaret Schmidt, Professor Emerita from Arizona State University, reflects on changes in the past 30 years of educational research, with a challenge to consider what each individual might contribute to the continued evolution of our understandings of music learning and teaching.

Changes in life bring opportunities to reflect. As an elementary and middle school student, I thought that when I became 16, I would know everything. When I turned 16, I thought maybe I would feel "grown up" at 21. At 21, I decided probably 30 would be the magic time. At 40, I began to see articles musing that at 40, one had to admit to being "middle-aged" and, on the day of my 50th birthday, AARP found me (I do not know how they do it) and welcomed me to the benefits of being a "senior citizen." Recently, I retired, which is bringing new views of my place in the world.

A benefit of thinking about my career retrospectively is that it permits me to take a longer view of trends and to better understand things in historical context. As I've aged, I have begun to thoroughly enjoy reading histories, because I have realized those historical figures were just people like us, trying to do the best they could with the knowledge and understandings they had at the time. For a fun read, skim Edward Bailey Birge's (1928) history of music education. A founding member of the Music Supervisors National Conference (MSNC), Birge does not try to

present a particularly impartial interpretation of discussions of the issues of his day held at meetings of MSNC (the forerunner of MENC and NAfME). Personalities and arguments then were eerily similar to those we encounter today. Similarly, the stories I hear on National Public Radio or read about in the newspaper (now you *know* I am a real dinosaur) remind us that contentiousness in Congress goes back to the days of drafting the Constitution and has historically included even less polite name-calling than we experience today.

It would be possible to make such observations and wonder if we ever make any progress. If the adage "The more things change, the more they are the same" holds any truth, we might be tempted to despair. Yet from my vantage point as a "senior citizen" (even if I don't feel like one), I can see that the world has changed and evolved during my almost 50 years as an elementary-middle school orchestra teacher and teacher educator. When I was in elementary school, women could rarely hold credit cards in their own name. In my hometown, African Americans could not choose to live anywhere they could afford to buy a house. Our elementary school had music and art instruction once a month, taught by specialists who traveled to all the city's elementary schools. After college, my first car cost $3600 new. (However, for context, the year's salary for my first teaching job was $7600.)

Things have also evolved in teacher education, albeit slowly. In the 1960s and 1970s, U.S.-based educational researchers began gradually to incorporate work by researchers in other domains and nations (e.g., philosophers and educators such as John Dewey and Paolo Freire, psychologists Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, as well as sociologists, ethnographers, and British educational researchers). These scholars challenged the long-standing "banking" model of teaching, and, through the 1980s and 1990s, researchers have gradually brought more focus to the ways that learners' own experiences, both inside and out of school, influence their learning. My high school American Studies teachers introduced me to the idea that individual perspective makes a difference, asking us to question whether U.S. aid to other countries inevitably brings what those countries themselves want. A college professor in one of my education courses planted the notion that teachers cannot teach anyone anything—the most we can do is facilitate opportunities for others to learn. I remember, however, having no early field experiences and arriving at the end of my undergraduate coursework thinking, "What if I don't like music teaching?" Fortunately, as a student teacher, I discovered that I loved teaching, although at least to my conscious knowledge, my mentor teachers left no particular impressions on me. In contrast, the music educators I worked with in my first job as an elementary orchestra teacher were hugely influential, helping me discover more about learning and teaching, as well as about life as an adult. More than anything,

because they were a close-knit and supportive group, I learned to value working with a community of supportive colleagues and students.

After 14 years of teaching elementary and middle school orchestra, I entered a doctoral program. For some reason, even though I had only hosted one student teacher, I knew I wanted to work with young teachers, and I knew a doctorate was needed. I had almost no idea what I'd signed up for. The big words in the voluminous readings seemed incomprehensible, even after checking their dictionary definitions. I had a difficult time with the transition from being in charge of a classroom to being told what assignment was due when. I did not even know how to ask questions about what seemed to be unwritten rules that governed the doctoral program. Once again, a community—this time of my fellow students—helped ground me. I began to get interested in the value of research. My first research paper was about different forms of teacher observation. I was discouraged to learn that most of the systems relied on counting teachers' observed actions, focusing on questioning, eye contact, proximity, saying students' names, or other discrete behaviors. I was excited to find support for my cynicism about these studies in a 1986 article predicting the next decade of music teaching:

> Most discussions of teacher education include at some point a list of the skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that a teacher ought to possess. These lists often seem to be merely vast compilations of all the desirable qualities anyone can think of. These qualities are always good to have, but very long lists are useless because some traits are clearly more important than others, because strengths in some can compensate for weakness in others, and because no one has all of them anyway. (Lehman, 1986, p. 8)

Lehman wrote this near the end of his presidency of MENC (now NAfME), four years after the founding of the Society for Music Teacher Education. His statement summed up my thinking about the state of teacher education and evaluation at the time.

Fortunately, one day while walking through the College of Education, I saw a sign about a new course, the Socialization of Student Teachers. I did not really know what "socialization" was, but I was discouraged by research in music teacher education and figured I would give the course a try. Through course readings and class discussions, I began to make sense of what I had been observing about learning to teach in the undergraduate music education classes. In general teacher education, popular research topics at the time were the influences of one's own learning experiences on beliefs about teaching (e.g., Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1994), the use of various forms of reflection in

teacher education (e.g., Gore, 1987; Grimmett & Erickson, 1988), and critiques of a technical approach to learning to teach (e.g., Gitlin & Smyth, 1989; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1985). I read Donald Schön's book, *The Reflective Practitioner* (1987), which soon made its way into music teacher education. Like Schön, I was interested in the "messy, confusing problems [that] defy technical solution" which seemed to me ultimately "the problems of greatest human concern" (p. 3). In addition, this course introduced me to qualitative research methods, then fairly new in educational research and virtually unheard of in music education research. This holistic approach to research made immense sense to me as a way to study "messy" problems in learning to teach. I am forever grateful that the professor of this course, J. Gary Knowles, agreed to co-chair my dissertation and guide me in that work, along with Catherine Nadon-Gabrion, who had sparked my initial interest in music student teachers. The rest, as the saying goes, is history.

I believe that ultimately, research in education, teacher education, and music teacher education over the years has led to improvements in music learning and teaching. A few examples of what I hope is progress in our profession as educators and researchers include (with apologies for the many influential researchers whose work will not fit in this brief reflection):

- Now, educators seldom espouse a "banking" model of teaching, opting for more constructivist approaches that recognize both the benefits and limitations of experiences individual students bring to their learning (e.g., Kelly-McHale, 2013; Wiggins, 2015).
- Similarly, teacher education classes recognize the influence of preservice teachers' prior experiences, and balance peer teaching and early field experiences with reflection prior to student teaching (e.g., Orzolek, 2018; Powell, 2014).
- We recognize the importance of individuals' home cultures in learning and teaching and are developing more culturally responsive pedagogical approaches (e.g., McKoy & Lind, 2016; Soto, 2018).
- Teacher preparation is seldom referred to as teacher "training," shifting from more technical approaches to acknowledging the "messiness" of managing a classroom and from the activities of teaching to how teachers conceive their identities and their practices (e.g., Draves, 2014; Roberts, 2004).
- Music learning activities focus more on process and meaning-making (e.g., Duke, 2012; Wiggins, 2015).
- We are realizing that a long-established view of music learning as school-based (e.g., Stauffer, 2016) and limited to elementary music, band, orchestra,

and choir meets the music-making needs and interests of too few learners (e.g., Allsup & Benedict, 2008; Williams, 2011).

- We are identifying and celebrating a range of music learning and music making opportunities from formal to informal (e.g., Abramo & Austin, 2014; Hess, 2020).
- We are exploring a variety of different learning opportunities, expanded to include lifelong learning by music makers and both informal and professional music educators (e.g., Mantie, 2012; Myers, 2007).
- We continue to conduct research to learn more about all of the above and continue to enrich our work with connections to research theories and methods from an expanding array of fields and sub-fields.

The above ideas were hot research topics and were much debated in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Now they seem to be commonly accepted as truisms. Allsup's (2015) description of this time in our profession as a "both/and moment" seems apt—actually, this time seems to offer a wide variety of such moments. The challenge is to balance depth and breadth in our individual and collective work, taking full advantage of participation in a range of learning and research communities, from very broad (e.g., ISME, NAfME and its societies, AERA) to more specialized (e.g., popular music, QRME, narrative, etc.).

This reflection is an attempt to contextualize my experiences in a very small slice of music education history. You are having your own experiences in your slice of that history. Who has influenced your thinking about learning and teaching? Are those same ideas still relevant and, more importantly, useful? (I did not have room here to discuss the many ideas I have tried and discarded.) What other possibilities can you imagine for the communities in which you belong? What connections might you make among the thinkers or communities you know? What ideas or experiences have you stumbled on that might be worth a second look? The point of this essay is not for me to tell *you* about *my* experiences. Rather, I hope that my reflections demonstrate the ways that individuals and communities, serendipity and purposeful actions, shape our collective experiences, and that they inspire you to think about where the profession might go during the course of your career. What small contributions might you be making to help us forge paths leading to ever more inclusive and expansive music learning and teaching research and practice?

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