

Music teacher effectiveness: Selected historical and contemporary research approaches

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Abstract

This article reviews and analyzes selected past and current research approaches in the study of music teacher effectiveness. Early “teacher characteristic studies” are discussed along with the role of these first-generation studies in attempting to identify personal qualities and characteristics of apparently effective or ineffective teachers. These historical studies are contrasted with selected examples of contemporary research in music teacher effectiveness. Newer studies employ a broad range of methodologies and improved research techniques including the use of narrative descriptions of effective music teachers to account for and emphasize context and focus on the individual teacher and class as the unit of analysis. Two recent studies in music teacher effectiveness utilizing this narrative research approach are presented. Music teacher effectiveness research offers our profession a profile of the effective music teacher. Such a profile, of course, needs to be understood, interpreted, and applied so that our vision of the effective music teacher is based on our profession’s best collective research and wisdom.

Key words: Music teacher effectiveness

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Throughout the Asia-Pacific region there is a call for greater teacher competence. In response to perceived failures of the various educational systems to provide competent teachers, various remedies are being instituted including stricter teacher certification or licensing, improvements in pre-service and in-service teacher education, increased pre-and-post employment testing, greater emphasis on classroom (teacher) assessment, and rigorous student achievement testing (see for example, Lee & Barro, 2001).

One fascinating dimension of this heightened interest in educational improvement in the Asia-Pacific region is a focus on teacher effectiveness. For example, schools in Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Japan, and China participated in an international

system for teacher observation and measuring teacher effectiveness (Teddle, Creemers, Kyriakides, Muijs & Yu, 2006). Wu (2005) reported on a detailed study of the relationship between teachers’ teaching effectiveness and school effectiveness in comprehensive high schools in Taiwan. Jones, Fujita and Ding (2004) compared teaching practices in China, Japan, and the United Kingdom, and Avalos and Haddad (2000) undertook a comprehensive review of teacher effectiveness research in Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand. Teacher effectiveness in ethnic minority regions of Mainland China has also been examined (Chapman, Xiaoyu & Postiglione, 2000) and within music education, Brand (2006) has documented effective music teachers throughout Southeast Asia and China.

While there is agreement that there should be highly competent music teachers in every classroom, rehearsal hall, or studio, there is often a lack of consensus in identifying and describing effective music teachers. Particular given that music teaching involves a multitude of different tasks, and as the tasks prescribed for the music teacher vary, so too do the criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of the teacher (Travers, 1981).

The past

Historically, Kratz' 1896 study is not only considered to be the first known study of teacher effectiveness, but also one of the first studies in educational research. Kratz asked a large group of elementary school children to recall the best teacher they ever had and to write down what makes that teacher different from their other teachers. The subjects' responses were then collected and compared, and formed the basis of a list of characteristics that, according to Kratz, differentiated effective from the ineffective teacher. His study was immensely significant in that this basic design served as a precedent for similar studies for the next 100 or so years. Other researchers have replicated his study time and again, frequently changing the group of respondents from current students to graduates, educators, professors, or administrators. For example, in music education (see Baker, 1981) music teaching characteristics of effective music teaching were developed based on the responses of music educators and (general) administrators.

Kratz' efforts were the first of an entire genre of teacher effectiveness research sometimes referred to as "teacher characteristic studies" (i.e., studies which attempt to identify personal qualities and characteristics of apparently effective or ineffective teachers). Such studies (e.g., Charters & Waples, 1929; Symonds, 1955; Goodenough, 1957; Hesch, 1962; Culpepper, 1956) typically compared personal characteristics (e.g., warmth, enthusiasm, interest in children, adaptability, etc.) of teachers with ratings of their perceived abilities to teach as determined

by principals, music supervisors, students or others of authority.

Results of these types of studies found that effective teachers possess the following characteristics: (Note: These are not listed in relative importance.)

- leadership
- patience
- neatness
- kindness
- musical proficiency
- honesty
- business ability
- well integrated personality
- technical and practical grasp of magnetism
- basic psychological principles
- secure
- emotional stability
- initiative
- good judgment
- tact
- adaptability
- communication skills
- consideration
- ability to analyse situations
- enthusiasm
- self-confidence
- like children
- persistence
- sympathy
- social compatibility
- philosophy of life
- personal integrity
- physical health
- ability to plan
- perseverance
- general functional intelligence
- self-sufficiency
- cooperative spirit
- dependability

Having long dominated research in teaching, these teacher characteristic studies are today viewed as a "first generation" approach to the study of teacher effectiveness. They are criticized for several reasons. First, no efforts were made to validate any of the characteristics by determining whether students taught by teachers perceived as possessing these "effective-teaching characteristics," in fact, learned more than students taught by teachers perceived as possessing fewer such characteristics. Thus, these studies only reflect a teacher's ability to impress others, they do no ask nor answer which teachers were actually most effective in bring about student learning.

Second, such teacher characteristic studies tend to equate "good person" with "good teacher."

Nearly all of the descriptors of “effective teachers” are qualities and characteristics of any successful individual in almost any job. Moreover, the concept that an “effective teacher” is simply a “good person” hardly advances our understanding of teaching/learning process (McNeil & Popham, 1977). Further, such studies almost totally emphasize preexisting teacher characteristics, (e.g., good judgment, personal integrity, consideration, magnetism, etc.) which are generally not taught in music teacher education programs. Therefore, these studies not only are based on the concept that good teachers are born, not made, but these studies infer that professional teacher education has little to contribute to the making of an effective teacher.

Closer look at music teacher effectiveness

Initially, it would appear easy to identify and describe highly effective music teachers. Looking deeper though, defining effective music teaching maybe more complex. In the past, probably the most simplistic way of identifying an effective music teacher was based on traditional criteria such as education and experience. Obviously, this simple approach ignores the actual quality of music teaching instruction and learning.

More sensibly, most studies which seek to identify effective teachers rely on two categories of teaching variables: (1) personal qualities of teacher, such as intelligence, attitudes, preparation, academic achievement, or personality dimensions; or (2) aspects of classroom/rehearsal performance measured by either low-inference behavior categories (e.g., frequency of praise statements, number of higher level questions) or high-inference rating scales (e.g., warmth, enthusiasm, clarity of instruction). Additionally, effective teachers have been identified based on subjective ratings by principals or supervisors or by objective tests of actual student achievement (*Teacher Competence*, 1985).

The classic argument over whether music teaching is an art or a science may have hampered

empirical work in extending knowledge of music teacher effectiveness. Some believe that the study of music teacher effectiveness is not amenable to scientific inquiry. On the other hand, Wise, Darling-Hammond, McLaughlin and Bernstein (1984) define teaching as a craft, labor, profession, and art, and conceive each of these components as being evaluated and researched differently. Today, however, most scholars (e.g., Taebel, 1992) believe that although music teaching contains aspects of both art and science, it can be examined systemically from numerous perspectives. Effective music teaching reflects some special combination of pedagogical talents, personal magnetism, musicianship, artistry, knowledge, and organizational and communication effectiveness – all within the cultural, political, and community context of a teaching/learning setting. These effective music teachers are what Eisner (1983) calls “artists in the classroom” (p. 4) and like other artists, these highly skilled music teachers “create” the conditions that (in terms of teaching) advance his or her students from one musical level to another.

Contemporary research in music teacher effectiveness

Contemporary research in music teacher effectiveness employs a broad range of methodologies and improved research techniques including use of larger sample sizes to permit more meaningful statistical analyses, and formulation and use of more sophisticated classroom observation and coding instruments. Additionally, using narrative descriptions of effective music teachers, a number of studies now attempt to account for and emphasize context and focus on the individual teacher and class as the unit of analysis.

Such narrative research studies have appeared in music education journals, including Carlow's (2006) narrative of an English language learner in high school choir, Brand's (2007) experience as a student in a Karaoke school in Bangkok, Schmidt's and Canser's (2007) chronicle of a string teacher's efforts

to improve his teaching, Abril's (2007) narrative study of singing and social anxiety, and Micheel-Mays, Micheel-Mays and Conway's (2005) narrative of issues and struggles of music student teachers and first-year teachers. Two recent studies in music teacher effectiveness utilize this narrative research approach in analyzing effective music teaching.

The first example is by Duke and Simmons (2006) who used narrative descriptions in their study of common qualities observed in the lessons of three renowned artist-teachers. Based on approximately 25 hours of video recordings of lessons, it was found that 19 teaching qualities were prominent features common to all three of these internationally recognized artist-teachers. In spite of the fact that each of the three artist-teachers taught different instruments (i.e., oboe, viola, and piano), the 19 identified teaching qualities were consistently found among these three teachers. Some of these qualities dealt with the music teachers' goals and expectations. For example, these highly regarded teachers' assigned repertoire that was appropriate for or well within the technical capabilities of their students. Also, these extraordinary music teachers had a precise auditory image of the musical piece and this clear musical expectation was used in instructing and guiding their students. These teachers also consistently demanded highest quality of tone from their students.

As Duke and Simons point out, all the video taped lessons were of teachers working with student musicians who were at the professional or near professional level. Thus, it is also important to identify teaching qualities of music teachers who are highly effective with a broader range of students including students who have had less musical opportunities and who are possibly less talented, diligent, or motivated than the students observed in the Duke and Simmons study.

The second example of narrative research in music teacher effectiveness is reflected in Brand's (2006) work. For over two years, Brand studied and observed, in depth, fifteen music teachers from

nine countries in Southeast Asia and China. He found that effective music teachers possess not a few qualities but actually a constellation of values, music teaching skills, musicianship, charisma, personality, style, flexibility, tolerance, sincerity, and responsiveness. Underlying all of these diverse qualities is the ability to connect to children. It is what Brand calls a "near magical connection" (p. 172) between the age group music teachers work with and their own teacher personality that characterize the most successful music teaching.

All of the music teachers Brand observed were, in general, extremely knowledgeable about the aspects of music they taught. But he observed something more than music knowledge in these fifteen Asian teachers; he saw high energy and enthusiasm during their teaching. The observed music teachers also made a huge investment in time that it takes for successful teaching in preparing, thinking, planning, studying, reviewing, making rehearsal notes, marking up scores, finding new songs and musical activities, and locating that perfect movement which will enhance the children's understanding of, for example, the phrasing.

Brand also found that these effective music teachers in Asia were especially spontaneously resourceful and responsive in their teaching. Referred to as "improvisatory resourceful" (p. 173), these outstanding music teachers were especially effective in finding and utilizing "teachable moments" to preserve the freshness and excitement of their teaching. Other teaching qualities observed in these effective music teachers included their students knowing their teacher's expectations regarding both musical performance and student behavior, to the extent that these music students were often able to exceed beyond their own expectations. Brand's highly effective music teachers demonstrated masterful communication skills, showing that they genuinely cared for their students, and serving as beacons of inspirations for their students.

Summary

In spite of what both historic and contemporary research in teacher effectiveness may claim, research on music teacher effectiveness has not identified and neatly packaged the “good” teacher. It has, however, concentrated on the study of teacher effectiveness as a phenomenon, with important concepts and research methods and strategies to study these concepts. The music education profession holds a great diversity of views on teacher effectiveness and research. Many of our colleagues, for example, hold romanticized ideas that teaching one of the arts is an art itself—“mystical art”—and therefore not amenable to empirical study.

There are others who reject the need for research in music teaching on the simplistic basis that “you have to find out what works for you” (Brophy, 1979, p. 21). Still others in music education are so totally dedicated to a particular curriculum or approach to teaching music that they have little interest in research on teaching techniques. Obviously, both—what is taught (curriculum) and how well it is taught (method)—are important and play defining roles in teacher effectiveness research.

Although such differences of attitudes are expected within a large and extremely diverse group such as music teachers, this diversity is reflective of the confusion and complexity that surrounds teacher effectiveness issues. Such confusion also arises over the variety of terms used for different purposes. In the literature, “teacher competence” can refer to everything from training procedures, characteristics of teachers, behavior in the classroom, and effects produced by teachers. Other terms such as “effectiveness” and “performance” have an equal number of uses. According to Biddle and Ellena (1964), teacher effectiveness research will only be meaningful “with an agreement upon language and the variable for which words stand” (p. 4).

The other difficulty in teacher effectiveness research involves the complexity of the issues. Teaching involves the teacher, students, outside influences, inside-the-school environments, and

subject matters—all in dynamic interactions that a search for one single kind of good teacher that fits universally all teaching environments, all teachers, and pupils is futile. Thus, our expectations for research in teacher effectiveness need to be clarified. The conduct of research forces a sampling of the complexities of teaching while necessitating the researcher to narrowly focus his or her view (Lanier & Floden, 1978). Therefore, few principles of effective teaching generalize across student ages, developmental levels, socioeconomic backgrounds, culture, and types of learning or subject matter.

In spite of the difficulties and complexities, our definitions, concepts, and perceptions of effective music teaching must rely on thoughtful study and systematic research. Music teacher effectiveness research offers our profession a profile of the effective music teacher. Such a profile, of course, needs to be understood, interpreted, and applied so that our vision of the effective music teacher is based on our profession's best collective research and wisdom.

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