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*Boston University*

## **Influencing Teachers' Belief Systems to Promote a Comprehensive Music Education**

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In higher education, we aim to prepare our students to be the best music teachers they can be. We look for the best and the brightest students, the ones who excelled in their secondary music programs, took private lessons, and participated in honors ensembles as well community-based youth music organizations. Our students come to us because they loved being in band, orchestra, or choir. Those programs served them well, so they know what they want their future programs to look like. They admired their music teachers and want to emulate them. And so, school music programs have continued to look more or less unchanged for decades. But what about those who are not served by traditional school music programs? Are we preparing future music educators to reach those students? How can we instill in preservice music teachers an understanding of the importance of providing all students with an opportunity to study music in a way that is meaningful to them?

In many of the courses that I teach, I ask my students to articulate their beliefs about music teaching and learning. As I am first getting to know them, I find it helpful to understand their backgrounds, and where they are coming from ideologically. I believe that the students are comforted when they hear that some of their classmates' perspectives reinforce their own. I also believe that it is important that they hear points of view that challenge the ones they hold. In my experience, students' beliefs about the value of various styles of music, the types of courses that should be offered, the importance of competition, and vary greatly from one another, but almost universally, their beliefs mirror the experiences that they had. I've also found that students entering undergraduate music education programs believe that school music is important, but

few can articulate why. They believe that it is important for students to have the opportunity to play in band or sing in choir, typically because they know that they enjoyed it, or were passionate about it, and they believe that others should have that same opportunity.

Unfortunately, many music education students seem blissfully unaware that their school music programs did not address the needs of all students. Many have never considered why some students don't participate. In our initial discussion, I've discovered a belief that students who choose not to participate have nothing to do with the music program. The reasons for a lack of participation rarely addressed the students lack of interest in the types of musical experiences, or the types of music that were taught. Notably, they did not acknowledge that their peers were often quite interested in and knowledgeable about music. They clearly believe that the traditional music education model works, that it is there as an opportunity for those who want it, and that the focus on western art music, with a nod to jazz and non-western music, is not just appropriate, but ideal. Yet, much discourse in the professional community addresses the need to diversify the opportunities available to students and the music that we include in the curriculum. If we, as music teacher educators, believe that music programs, particularly those at the secondary level, should be attractive to all students, then we need to convince our students, the future music teachers, to break free of the traditional model. This requires changing their belief system.

Those who study beliefs typically think of them as an individualized set of understandings about the world. Unlike knowledge, beliefs are not subject to reality or logic. There may or may not be any evidence to support the "truth" of one's beliefs. In fact, many people will hold onto beliefs even in the face of strong contradictory evidence (Pajares, 1992; Rino, 2015; Thompson, 2007). When we experience something, we understand—or make sense of—that experience based on our beliefs. Those beliefs can also influence our actions. For

example, a new teacher may inherit a music program that looked exactly like the one from which they graduated. Perhaps it consists of a concert band, a small string orchestra, an after-school jazz ensemble, a competitive marching band, and several choirs. These ensembles play and sing only the best literature. To the teacher, this program is ideal, because it is the type of program he experienced in high school, it served him and all his friends, and it is also the model that he and everyone else he knew that enjoyed music in college experienced. So, when he is approached by a small group of students about starting a popular music ensemble, or perhaps a music production class, he may reject the idea because he believes that the program already offers choices that should appeal to a wide variety of students, and because there is no value to engaging students in musical experiences that they can get on their own. With a different belief system, he may have been more open to change, or even worked proactively to develop a music program that would attract more students.

Our beliefs systems are grounded in our personal experiences. Most future teachers have firmly established beliefs about teaching even before they enter college. Those beliefs are based on their extensive experience in schools, where they sat in classrooms and observed teachers every day (Pajares, 1992). They formed opinions about their teachers' personal characteristics and their teaching styles. They also developed beliefs about schools, about music programs, and about curriculum. Research has shown that music teachers' beliefs about good teaching were most strongly influenced by how they were taught (Mills & Smith, 2003). Particularly memorable experiences most strongly influenced beliefs about how to teach. Beliefs are directly related to teacher practice. (Rino, 2015).

We know from studies of preservice music teachers' beliefs that students have preconceptions (Emmanuel, 2005; Schmidt, 1998), and research literature is clear that beliefs are

resistant to change (Pajares, 1992; Rino, 2015; Thompson, 2007). Beliefs are less likely to be changed when they are long-held or when they are particularly strong. Still, preservice teachers' beliefs can be changed through new experiences (Butler, 2001), particularly if they engage in high-level reflections that include talking about the experience (Emmanuel, 2005; Thompson, 2007). One challenge for faculty who want to influence their students' beliefs is that when we present new ideas, they will consider them in relation to their current beliefs. If the ideas contradict their belief systems, they are likely to reject them, particularly when their beliefs are strong. How, then, can we impact students' beliefs, particularly those related to the importance of music programs that are comprehensive in content and types of experiences, and that will be attractive to the entire student body?

In my introductory-level classes, I expose students to as many new ideas as possible, without endorsing any particular set of beliefs, and—initially—without critique. When the students feel free to talk about their beliefs without being worried that something so personal will be challenged, they are more open. As a result, the entire class becomes aware of the extent of variety in beliefs and experiences. Only when we turn to discussing ideas that were presented in readings or in lectures do I ask the students to critically examine new ideas. Because they are discussing the ideas of others, they seem more willing to problematize ones that align with their own, and more willing to find strengths in ideas that conflict with their belief systems. Thus, while they are certainly aware of their own beliefs in relation to those that I am presenting, they are able to think about them critically without feeling threatened. Furthermore, I find that as they begin to think critically, most students' beliefs begin to shift in some way, without my having to directly challenge their preconceptions. They become inspired by new possibilities, and as they begin to articulate a belief system they can present an argument in support of those beliefs. As

that happens, they demonstrate an openness to ongoing reconsideration and continuing development of their beliefs.

Making school music programs attractive to a greater number—if not all—students, will require that the teachers in charge of those music programs believe that it is important, believe that it is valuable, and believe that it is possible. As music teacher educators, we are in a position to encourage the development of a belief system that will support those changes. But the introduction of those beliefs needs to be undertaken carefully and systematically so that they will be accepted, particularly by those students who feel strongly that their traditional programs served their purpose well.

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