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# Early-career music teachers' perspectives of their initial teacher education program in China

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## Abstract

Initial teacher education plays an important role in preparing music teachers for schools. There is a growing interest in Chinese music teacher education, though limited research currently exists. This study investigated early-career teachers' perspectives concerning the efficacy of the initial music teacher education program at Yu Cai Normal University (pseudonym), China. This mixed-methods study used a sequential explanatory design where qualitative interview data were used to provide further explanation and detail regarding survey results. The perceptions of early-career music teachers were sought on the importance, effectiveness, and usefulness of their initial teacher education and the most rewarding and challenging aspects of their beginning careers. Phase 1 of the data collection consisted of an online survey with 32 music education graduates of Yu Cai Normal University from 2015–2019. Phase 2 involved one-on-one semi-structured online interviews with three participants offering a range of views. Phase 3 was a combined analysis and discussion of the findings from Phases 1 and 2. Findings indicate that early-career music teachers highly valued their initial teacher education and their studies adequately prepared them for work, though the quality of their university subjects could still be improved. Early-career music teachers embrace the challenges of the profession and choir, competitions, and the act of teaching are their greatest rewards. Practical subjects remain the most critical components of music teacher education, and theory must be situated in contextualized practice.

## Keywords

mixed methods, music education, music teacher education, preservice, teacher education

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## Introduction

Initial teacher education has been recognized as complex (Conway, & Hibbard, 2019) and a critical component of preparing music teachers for work in schools (Ballantyne & Packer, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2000). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in Chinese music teacher education; however, there has been very little research that seeks early-career music teachers' perspectives of their initial teacher education program at universities and what they consider essential to succeed in teaching at the beginning of their careers. This study is significant because it offers reflective perspectives on teacher education directly from graduates now employed as school music teachers in China. Their views will be used to make recommendations for improving Chinese music initial music teacher education programs.

## Review of literature

### *Early-career teachers*

Teaching can be a challenging profession, especially for early-career teachers who are settling into their careers (Beltman et al., 2011; Hong, 2010, 2012; Kuebel, 2019, 2021). Early-career teachers are considered to be at the beginning of their career having recently graduated from their teacher education degree. Previous studies have used a range of years when referring to early-career teachers, such as 1 (e.g., Conway, 2002), 2 (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2014), 3 (e.g., Corbell et al., 2010; Roulston et al., 2005), 4 (e.g., Ballantyne & Packer, 2004), 5 (e.g., Hong, 2012), and 10 (e.g., Krueger, 2000; Legette, 2013) years of teaching, respectively. For the purposes of this study, early-career teachers are considered within their first 5 years of beginning teaching.

Mansfield et al. (2014) reported that early-career teachers confront various difficulties. How they deal with these challenges has long-term repercussions for their careers. The difficulties include hesitancy to seek support (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009), poor self-efficacy (Castro et al., 2010), low confidence (Hash, 2010; Kastner et al., 2019), concerns covering curriculum content (McCann & Johannessen, 2004), job stability (Stallions et al., 2012), and differing world-views between ideal and actual teaching practices; "praxis shock" (Ballantyne, 2007a; Ballantyne & Retell, 2020). Despite decades of documented research and policy initiatives, there is still a long way to go in improving early-career teachers' experiences (Schuck et al., 2018).

Chinese music teachers' work predominantly consists of classroom teaching (Chinese and Western music theory, repertoire appreciation, and performance) and extra-curricular activities (choir and band; Ministry of Education, China, 2011). Research investigating Chinese early-career music teachers is extremely limited, though existing studies report similar challenges to those already described. There is a significant gap between theory and practice in music teachers' preservice education, and beginning music teachers are inadequately prepared for the practical aspects of music teaching (Hu, 2021; Z. C. Li, 2010; Min & Le, 2012; Y. Yang, 2022a; Yin & Guo, 2014). In a survey of 65 music teachers who had taught in primary and secondary schools in Guangdong Province for less than 3 years, 40% indicated that they were uncomfortable being a music teacher because the content they had learned in their university studies did not support them in the classroom (W. J. Chen, 2018). It has also been found that there is a difference between imagined and actual Chinese music teachers' lives (M. Yang, 2015; Y. Yang, 2022b).

### *Initial teacher education*

There is a direct correlation between the success of early-career teachers and their initial teacher education (Ballantyne, 2007a; Powell & Parker, 2017). Initial teacher education (also

referred to as preservice teacher education) is the entry-level qualification and accreditation that must be obtained before beginning to work as a schoolteacher (Yeigh & Lynch, 2017). Initial teacher education is the first and most important step in a teacher's career, laying the foundation for a professional mindset and providing teachers with an essential toolkit for meaningful learning to take place in the classroom (Caena, 2014; Musset, 2010). However, initial teacher education is also highly scrutinized and a victim of ongoing reform (Gore et al., 2016; Rowe & Skourdoumbis, 2019).

Internationally, teacher educators have long sought to identify the tenets of effective music teacher education using the retrospective views of early-career teachers (e.g., Ballantyne, 2007b; Brophy, 2002; Conway, 2002, 2012, 2022; Haston & Leon-Guerrero, 2008; Legette, 2013; Mateiro et al., 2012; Roulston et al., 2005; Venesile, 2011). Early-career teachers desire increased focus on practical skill development in their initial teacher education (Ballantyne & Packer, 2004; Conway, 2002, 2012, 2022; Legette, 2013), and it is these music and teaching skills that enable university students to identify as music teachers (Ballantyne et al., 2012; Draves, 2014; Pellegrino, 2009). A practice-based teacher education where essential core practices are studied in an approximation of practice is advocated (Abramo, 2016). Millican and Forrester (2018, 2019) argued that modeling, sequencing instruction, and deconstructing music concepts are core music teaching practices alongside the importance of establishing relationships with students. It was proposed by Haston (2018) that music teacher education develops preservice teachers' abilities to solve problems and create new pedagogical content knowledge. Developing reflective skills and adaptive expertise have been recently argued as the major goals of music teacher education (Conway, 2019).

In China, initial music teacher education is framed by a national accreditation framework (Y. Yang, 2022b). Music teacher education in China is mainly focused on developing students' skills and understanding of the school curriculum, teacher pedagogy, and personal musicianship (Yin & Guo, 2014). Chinese initial music teacher education programs include *general education* curriculum (e.g., broad educational theory and knowledge), *music knowledge and skills* curriculum (e.g., music theory, vocal and keyboard performance skills), and *teacher education knowledge and skills* curriculum (e.g., teaching methods, class management; Ministry of Education, China, 2001). Preservice music teacher education is delivered mainly in the undergraduate Bachelor of Arts program majoring in Musicology and Teacher Education (Guo & Li, 2013). The main objective of the Musicology (Teacher Education) program is to prepare highly qualified music educators who have mastered essential curriculum knowledge and skills and evidence-based teaching approaches (Guo & Li, 2013).

Research investigating initial music teacher education programs in China is limited and has only emerged in the past 10 years. Guo and Li (2013) reported that, after surveying ten university Musicology (Teacher Education) programs in China, they found the curriculum consisted of 32.1% *general education* and 53% *music knowledge and skills*, while only 14.6% was *teacher education knowledge and skills*. Current initial music teacher education programs in China prioritize general education and music knowledge and skills over specific music teaching pedagogy. The over-representation of music subjects and the under-representation of music teaching subjects in the curriculum lead to an imbalance in music teachers' knowledge and skills (Yin & Guo, 2014). Guo and Li (2013) recommended increasing the weighting of *teacher education knowledge and skills* content, and W. J. Chen (2018) expressed concerns regarding teachers' ability to translate theory into practice.

### *School music education in China*

School music education in China mainly aims to cultivate students' interest in music and is supplemented by aesthetic sensibilities and moral education (Gao, 2013). In 2011, the Chinese

Ministry of Education released the *Full-Time Compulsory Music Curriculum Standards* (Ministry of Education, China, 2011), which marked a radical departure from the previous focus on theoretical knowledge and moved toward aesthetic appreciation and practical music making (X. P. Wang, 2015). Music teaching and performance competitions are highly regarded in China and are seen as an opportunity to improve music education, and teacher success is viewed favorably by school administrators (Liang, 2011; Wu & Clarke, 2018; Xie & Wah, 2011).

Despite significant Chinese school music curriculum advancements, the subject is still undervalued (X. L. Li, 2020; Sun & Leung, 2014). It has been suggested that Chinese school music teaching pedagogy is outdated, where students are disengaged and do not cooperate with classroom activities (Y. Li, 2019). Han and Leung (2017) argued that Chinese music teachers are too dependent on music textbooks and do not know how to use them effectively and critically. Furthermore, X. P. Wang (2015) stated that many Chinese music textbooks are monotonous and that students lose interest in repeating the same musical information. There have also been calls to diversify the Chinese music curriculum, including teaching popular music (Ho, 2016, 2017), but students doubt their teachers' abilities to teach these genres (Law & Ho, 2015). Improvements in initial teacher education have the potential to address these issues.

## Method

### *Mixed-methods research design*

This study used a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative research methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Johnson & Christensen, 2019). A sequential explanatory design was employed, where the emphasis was placed on the survey data, and then interview data were used to provide further explanations, detail, and interpretation of data (Creswell et al., 2003). A precedent for investigating music teachers' perspectives of initial teacher education using mixed-methods research exists with other studies (e.g., Ballantyne & Packer, 2004; Han & Leung, 2017). Data for this project were generated and analyzed in three phases. Phase 1 was a survey, followed by semi-structured interviews in Phase 2, and Phase 3 combining analysis and discussion. The results of the survey and interviews are presented separately and then mixed for the overall interpretation. The University of Queensland Humanities and Social Sciences, Low & Negligible Risk Ethics Sub-Committee granted ethical approval for human research in this study (Approval number 2020002778).

### *Research questions*

The research questions were constructed by incorporating a mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Research Question 1 (RQ1) exclusively relies upon the survey results, while the interview data help shape the results of the survey data in Research Questions 2 (RQ2) and 3 (RQ3).

*RQ1.* What does the survey data reveal about early-career music teachers' perspectives regarding the importance and effectiveness of their initial teacher education program at Yu Cai Normal University?

*RQ2.* In what ways do the interview data reporting the views of early-career music teachers about their rewards and challenges of teaching help to explain the results about the rewards and challenges reported in the survey?

RQ3. In what ways do the interview data reporting the views of early-career music teachers about the usefulness of their initial teacher education at Yu Cai Normal University help to explain the results about the usefulness of initial teacher education reported in the survey?

### *Phase 1: Survey*

The first phase sought the opinions of early-career music teachers about their preservice education program via an online survey using Qualtrics. To recruit participants, the participant information sheet (in English and Chinese) and survey link were posted in a Yu Cai Normal University music education graduate WeChat group, which consisted of approximately 50 music early-career music teachers. The information sheet and survey link were reposted five times over 2 weeks. Participation was voluntary, and participants were required to consent to data collection before completing the survey. The survey asked questions in English and Chinese and allowed participants to express their thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and values (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). Quantitative and qualitative questions used in the survey were inspired by previous research in Australian preservice music teacher education programs (Ballantyne & Packer, 2004). For this study, the survey was designed to align with the 12 core subjects of the *National Curriculum Guidance Programme for Undergraduate Courses in Musicology (Teacher Education)* issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, China, 2001). The survey asked participants for their views on these subjects, which fell into two categories based on the curriculum design criteria: *Music knowledge and skills* (Music theory, Music history knowledge, Vocal performance, Keyboard skills, Conducting skills, Physical training and choreography); and *Teacher education knowledge and skills* (Basic knowledge of education, Class management, Music teaching pedagogy, Modern music technology, Short-term internships, Long-term internships). As part of the survey, participants were asked to rate the *importance* and *effectiveness* of these 12 core subjects measured on a 5-point scale as used by Ballantyne and Packer (2004). For this study, “importance” refers to the value of a subject perceived by early-career teachers upon reflection on their initial teacher education and current teaching. “Effectiveness” refers to the perception of how well the subject prepared early-career teachers for their work. Importance was measured from “not important” to “extremely important” with the midpoint “important”, and teaching effectiveness was measured from “very poor” to “excellent” with the midpoint “adequate.” The mean and standard deviation of data were calculated by Qualtrics and checked manually.

### *Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews*

Following the survey, Phase 2 involved interviews to acquire in-depth and individual perspectives (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Three participants were selected based on their differing teaching contexts and years of experience, contrasting views from the questions that used a Likert-type scale, and their responses to open-ended questions. The three participants were contacted by email and provided with an interview information sheet and consent form in English and Chinese. Ballantyne and Packer’s (2004) study provided the researchers with a framework of interview questions. Participants’ perspectives were sought on their current teaching context, rewards and challenges of their teaching to date, and the most and least useful aspects of their initial teacher education. Video interviews were conducted online in Chinese, and the text was transcribed and translated into English. Participants did have some proficiency in English and were provided with the opportunity to amend their transcript.

### *Phase 3: Combined analysis and discussion*

The third phase was the combined analysis and discussion. Phases 1 and 2 data were coded and categorized into two to three emerging themes for each of the three research questions (Gibbs, 2007; Saldaña, 2021). Thematic analysis was used as a technique for detecting and analyzing meaning patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The results for each research question were interrogated and discussed against current literature.

### *Research setting*

The research setting of the study was the initial music teacher education program of Yu Cai Normal University (pseudonym), China. Normal Universities are public state-supported tertiary institutions focusing on teacher education. Yu Cai Normal University has been teaching students for approximately 50 years and has over 150,000 graduates. The university offers undergraduate, masters and doctoral degrees, with over 20,000 students and 800 academic staff. Music teacher education is studied in the Bachelor of Arts majoring in Musicology (Teacher Education) over 4 years full-time. The course curriculum consists of *general education*, *music knowledge and skills* and *teacher education knowledge*. All music education students study a traditional Chinese or classical Western instrument as part of their degree. Music education graduates need to obtain School Music Teacher Qualification Certification before being able to gain employment as a music teacher in a school (China Education Examination Net, 2022).

### *Participants*

Participants in this study were all early-career music teachers who graduated from Yu Cai Normal University between 2015 and 2019. A total of 32 early-career teachers completed the survey; however, not every respondent answered every question. Eight of the survey respondents identified as male (25%), 23 as female (72%), and one did not indicate (3%). Nine survey participants graduated in 2015 (28%), three each in 2016, 2017, and 2018 (9%), 12 (38%) in 2019, and two people did not answer (7%). Eleven respondents (34%) had taught for 5 years, 10 respondents (31%) for 1 year, five respondents (16%) for 3 years, four respondents (13%) for 2 years, one respondent (3%) for 4 years, and one did not indicate (3%). Thirteen teachers were working within public primary schools (40%), nine teachers at public secondary schools (28%), three teachers in private primary schools (9%), three teachers in public high schools (9%), one teacher at a private secondary school (3%), one teacher at a private high school (3%), and two did not answer.

Seven participants indicated they were willing to participate in an interview; one of these participants was excluded as they did not supply an email address. Of the six remaining participants, three were selected to be interviewed based on their answers to questions in the survey. The interviewees were all female but of different teaching ages, held conflicting views on some issues, and gave some responses to survey questions that the researcher believed could be further explored in an interview. All three interviewees had different teaching experiences and places of work. Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym, namely Lan, Qing, and Nina. Lan had been teaching for 1 year in a public high school, primarily Grade 12, and taught nine classes. Qing had been a music teacher in a public secondary school for 5 years, teaching seventh- and eighth-grade music classes. Nina had been a music teacher in a public primary school for less than 1 year and was teaching Grades 1, 2, and 4.

**Table 1.** The Means and Standard Deviation of the Importance and Effectiveness of Initial Teacher Education Subjects Rated by Early-Career Music Teachers.

Subject	Importance	Importance	Effectiveness	Effectiveness
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Music knowledge and skills subjects				
Conducting skills	4.07	0.75	2.89	1.08
Music history knowledge	3.7	0.81	3.54	1.12
Music theory	4.04	0.82	3.64	1.04
Physical training and choreography	4.04	0.91	2.75	1.02
Piano performance	4.36	0.72	3.07	0.98
Vocal performance	4.26	0.75	3.04	1.09
Teacher education knowledge and skills subjects				
Basic knowledge of education	4.21	0.86	3.04	0.88
Class management	4.52	0.63	2.86	1.12
Modern music technology	4.5	0.83	3.04	1.05
Music teaching pedagogy	4.19	0.69	3.00	1.12
Long-term internships	4.18	1.05	2.93	1.10
Short-term internships	4.04	0.8	3.07	1.07

## Results

### Survey results

Overall, all survey respondents ( $n = 32$ ), except one, believed their initial music teacher education at Yu Cai Normal University supported them positively in their early years of teaching, with 22 (69%) responding "Yes absolutely," nine (28%) "Yes mostly," one (3%) "Not really," and no response for "Definitely not." Despite this positive rating, areas for improvement can still be identified.

Considering the 12 specific subjects of their initial teacher education program, early-career music teachers were asked to rate the importance of these subjects and the effectiveness of how they were prepared to teach on a 5-point scale when considering their work as early-career teachers (see Table 1). Respondents gave a range of responses and rated subjects between "slightly important" (2) and "important" (3) to "extremely important" (5). No respondent indicated that any subject was "not important" (1). The means of all subjects, except Music history knowledge, were rated "very important" (4) by early-career teachers. The most important were Class management ( $M = 4.52$ ), Modern music technology ( $M = 4.5$ ), followed by Piano ( $M = 4.36$ ) and Vocal ( $M = 4.26$ ) Performance. The next most important were Basic knowledge of education ( $M = 4.21$ ), Music teaching pedagogy ( $M = 4.19$ ), and Long-term internships ( $M = 4.18$ ). The subjects that were rated the least important were Music history knowledge ( $M = 3.7$ ), Music theory ( $M = 4.04$ ), Physical training and choreography ( $M = 4.04$ ), and Short-term internships ( $M = 4.04$ ).

Wider range of responses were provided for effectiveness. All subjects were rated between "very poor" (1) and "excellent" (5). Early-career music teachers considered the theoretical subjects of their initial teacher education to prepare them the most effectively. Despite being the least valued, analysis indicated that the study of Music theory ( $M = 3.64$ ) and Music history knowledge ( $M = 3.54$ ) prepared them the most. Practical subjects were considered not to be as



effective. Conducting skills ( $M=2.89$ ), Class management ( $M=2.86$ ), Physical training and choreography ( $M=2.75$ ), and Long-term internship ( $M=2.93$ ) were considered to be less than adequate in their preservice education.

Early-career music teachers were also asked about the most rewarding and challenging aspects of their beginning careers. After coding and categorizing all responses, the three most rewarding aspects reported by respondents were Directing a choir (including performances, rehearsals, and competitions) (38%), The teaching process (including the act of teaching, learning, and positive relationships between students and teachers) (31%), and Competitions (including Choir, Open class, and Teaching competitions) (19%). It was found that respondents considered Competitions (25%) (19% being Open class competitions), Directing a choir (19%), and Class management (16%) their most challenging tasks as early-career music teachers. Respondents listed up to three different competitions as challenging. It is of note that the most rewarding tasks were also the most challenging.

In open-ended questions, participants were asked to list the three most useful and the three least applicable subjects from their initial teacher education program. These early-career teachers reported subjects with a practical music and teaching focus to be the most beneficial. The most useful aspects of their teacher education were Piano lessons (38%), followed by Vocal lessons (28%), and Music teaching pedagogy (25%). Respondents did not list many aspects of their teacher education that were not useful. It was found that 16% of early-career teachers considered Music theory and Music teaching pedagogy the least useful aspect of their initial teacher education, and 9% considered subjects not directly related to teaching music (e.g., English, Mathematics) were also not useful. It is noted that Music teaching pedagogy was considered both useful and not useful.

The survey results presented some differing opinions about the importance and effectiveness of initial teacher education subjects and rewarding and challenging early-career teacher tasks; however, overall judgments can still be made. Generally, early-career music teachers in this study regarded practical subjects directly related to music teaching as the most important to their work, whereas non-major and music theory subjects were the least valuable. Teachers described extra-curricular music activities beyond the classroom as the most challenging yet most rewarding activities.

### *Interview results*

Following the survey, a follow-up individual interview was conducted with three early-career music teachers (Lan, Qing, and Nina). Interviewees had different teaching experiences and differing views in their survey responses. They were asked questions regarding the most rewarding and challenging aspects of teaching to date and the most supportive and least supportive aspects of their initial music teacher education program at Yu Cai Normal University.

### *Most rewarding aspects of early-career teaching*

The three interviewees found the aspects of their early careers that allowed their professional knowledge and skills to be utilized and valued, to be the most rewarding. For example, Lan reported that knowing the history of Western and Chinese music assisted her in preparing senior students for an exam on music appreciation. In addition, she mentioned that her studies in pedagogy and psychology had been helpful in her early career. She said, "I teach high school students who are overstressed, and teachers need to have some understanding of students by going through and analysing their psychology."

Qing found participating in external music performance competitions to be the most rewarding task in her beginning work. These included organizing student participation in choral competitions and open class competitions. She said, "When I first started teaching, I took part in a provincial teaching competition. The competition enabled a lesson to be carefully polished, including the teaching process, the focus of the teaching objectives." Qing won a prize in this teaching competition, which gave her confidence and experience in teaching pedagogy. She said, "I was able to ask many people for help and support that I would not have received in a pre-service course." Qing also spoke about music teacher professional skills competitions, which are competitions for music theory, dancing, keyboard accompaniment, conducting, vocal, and instrumental performance. She said,

In fact, the preparation process (initial teacher education) is an exercise and a learning process in all these personal skills. The skills learnt in initial music teacher education are very helpful for this competition. . . . If you take these classes seriously, you will easily win the competition.

Nina found it gratifying to challenge existing practices and pass on new teaching methods and ideas to more experienced music teachers. She said, "We have a different philosophy from the previous teachers. Our philosophy will be a bit newer, the whole music classroom will have a better atmosphere, and will let students enjoy the music and learn knowledge."

### *Most challenging aspects of early-career teaching*

The three early-career music teachers provided varying responses to the question about the most challenging aspect of their teaching. Lan said the most challenging part of being a music teacher is student and class management. She said, "We have about 50 students in a class, and I teach nine classes requiring management skills. I think class management is very challenging."

Qing and Nina were relatively brief in their responses to this question. First, Qing stated that the task she found most rewarding was also the most challenging as it was a competition event. However, Nina said that the most challenging task was when the headmaster asked her to rehearse a dance program. This is because she was not a dance major and had not learned enough about dancing in her preservice education course.

### *The most useful aspects of initial music teacher education*

Regarding the most beneficial feature of the initial music teacher education program, all three interviewees described practical subjects of their teacher education as being the most useful. Lan and Qing both agreed that music skills (singing and playing instruments), keyboard accompaniment, and choral conducting helped them the most from their initial music teacher education program.

Lan and Qing both agreed that keyboard accompaniment skills they had learned in their music teacher education courses were very helpful in practice. Lan said, "Vocal music is inseparable from keyboard accompaniment. Keyboard skills are essential to the whole teaching process, including playing the accompaniment and warming up the chorus for the students." Qing also mentioned,

In music lessons, if you just sing and you don't have an accompaniment, it's rather boring. You definitely need an accompaniment. . . . We can't imitate the whole orchestra, but we can play the main melody, and we use improvisation to play the accompaniment, so it helps the students.

In addition, Lan and Qing found choral conducting very useful for school music teaching. Lan said, "There was a choir at university. We joined it and learned how to manage a choir better. We learnt a lot about management, knowing the voices, and conducting." Similarly, Qing noted that "If you can join a choir at university, then the concept of choral singing will be there . . . when you are in the workplace."

Nina gave relatively brief responses, mentioning that music and dance knowledge and skills are helpful but that courses only cover the basics.

### *The least useful aspects of initial music teacher education*

The three interviewees also gave very different answers to the question about the least useful initial teacher education subject. Lan found all of the teacher education subjects helpful. However, Qing listed several subjects that were not helpful in preparing her for teaching: harmonic analysis, general teaching pedagogy, class management, music teaching pedagogy, and internships. Regarding teaching pedagogy, she said,

The theory is the theory, and I don't know how to apply it to the process of teaching secondary school students. When I started in the workplace, it is all based on experience. It is difficult to transfer this theoretical knowledge into practice to guide students because they are so diverse. Each student is different, each age level is different, even each person is different, so it is difficult to use a unified theory to put it into practice. So, I think it is relatively useless.

In terms of class management, Qing said,

I felt that I had learned very little about class management at university. What I learnt at university was a theory of teaching and learning about the psychological characteristics of students in general. But after I started working, the students I met were different from the students in my books, so I couldn't use the methods I had learned from the books.

Nina felt that many of her university subjects failed to meet her needs as a music teacher, especially those that were not related to music teaching. She said,

I think it depends on the individual. For example, if you want to study for Postgraduate Entrance Examination, English and politics are the most important things for you. But if you want to be a music teacher, you may not be able to use it as much.

In summary, Lan had a largely positive response to the effectiveness of the course and overall valued her university study. In contrast, Nina reported that many university subjects did not meet her needs as a beginning teacher. Finally, Qing felt that theoretical subjects required deeper connection to practice to help students in their future teaching roles.

## **Analysis and discussion**

*RQ1. What does the survey data reveal about early-career music teachers' perspectives regarding the importance and effectiveness of their initial teacher education program at Yu Cai Normal University?*

Early-career music teachers in this study reported an overall positive attitude toward their initial teacher education. A range of Likert-type scale responses were collected regarding the

importance and effectiveness of the 12 teacher education subjects. For example, Music teaching pedagogy was rated between “important” and “extremely important,” and effectiveness was rated from “very poor” to “excellent.” This range of results represents the diverse experiences of individual teachers and the demands of their unique teaching contexts. Overall, on average, most of the 12 subjects were perceived to be “important” and “very important,” though only “adequate” in preparing teachers for work. Early-career teachers highly valued the subjects offered in their initial teacher education but believe there is room for improvement in teaching quality, particularly practical subjects directly relevant to their work as music teachers.

The relationships between the value of subjects and how well they prepared early-career music teachers were also analyzed, and some correlations emerged. For example, music history and theory were the least valued subjects, though they prepared teachers the most effectively. This perception may be due to several factors, such as early-career teachers feeling confident to teach this area of knowledge as a result of their teacher education, their success teaching, or the subject not being relevant to their teaching. Conducting skills, Class management, Physical training and choreography and Long-term internships, on average, were “very important” but were considered below adequate in how early-career teachers were prepared. It could be that teachers felt a strong need for these subjects in their work, so they expect more of the subject. It is noted that the survey asked early-career teachers about the effectiveness of subjects, whereas the teaching quality of different teacher educators was not considered or how it may have differed year to year. Arguably, different results could have occurred with staffing changes.

Findings from this study echo those found by previous research (e.g., Ballantyne & Packer, 2004; Legette, 2013), where early-career music teachers highly valued their initial teacher education but expected more regarding how their university study prepares them for work. Decades of research have been devoted to further understanding the components of effective teacher education (e.g., Abramo, 2016; Ballantyne, 2007b; Ballantyne & Packer, 2004; Conway, 2002, 2012, 2022; Haston, 2018; Millican & Forrester, 2019), but little interest has been given to the quality of tertiary teaching and warrants further investigation.

*RQ2. In what ways do the interview data reporting the views of early-career music teachers about their rewards and challenges of teaching help to explain the results about the rewards and challenges reported in the survey?*

Participants in this study reported that extra-curricular music activities and the teaching process were the most rewarding aspect of school music teaching despite being the most challenging. Choir was reported to be the most rewarding aspect of beginning teaching, including directing rehearsals, performances, and competitions. When interviewed, Qing felt that guiding students in extra-curricular activities created an opportunity for teachers to learn and improve their own skills. These opportunities also allowed teachers to receive recognition for their work from the broader school community. Despite choir being reported as the most dominant extra-curricular ensemble and highly valued by school communities (Ho, 2009; Leung, 2003), there is currently no initial teacher education subject dedicated to choral education in the Chinese music teacher education curriculum, which may have contributed to it being a challenge for early-career music teachers. It is suggested that a subject dedicated to choral education is created in the degree program.

Teaching and performance competitions are a regular part of Chinese music teachers' work, and it was found that 19% consider them rewarding, while one-quarter of early-career teachers viewed these as their most challenging tasks. The most challenging competitions were Open class competitions (19%). Qing reported that open classes were an opportunity to continue

developing as a teacher beyond university study and boost her confidence, enabling her to “polish” her teaching and seek support from more experienced teachers. This phenomenon in China has previously been reported as an important aspect of in-service teachers’ professional growth extending on initial teacher education and an approach that might be adapted for other countries (Liang, 2011; Wu & Clarke, 2018; Xie & Wah, 2011).

The interaction and relationship between students were also seen as both rewarding and challenging by early-career teachers. They reported that the teaching process and forming positive student–teacher relationships was professionally satisfying; however, class management proved difficult. In the interview, Lan identified class management as demanding, saying, “we have about 50 students in a class, and I teach nine classes requiring management skills.” Establishing positive relationships with students is considered a core teaching practice (Millican & Forrester, 2018, 2019). We suggest a need to situate initial teacher education theory more deeply in practice and provide more hands-on experience and class management problem-solving (Legette, 2013). Classroom management and other general education subjects would also benefit from being contextualized for the music classroom (Ballantyne, 2007b).

*RQ3. In what ways do the interview data reporting the views of early-career music teachers about the usefulness of their initial teacher education at Yu Cai Normal University help to explain the results about the usefulness of initial teacher education reported in the survey?*

Early-career music teachers believed that practical music performance and teaching subjects prepared them the most for their work. These different practical subjects are also interconnected, such as singing and piano lessons, conducting and teaching skills assisting teachers in directing choirs. Lan exclaimed, “vocal music is inseparable from keyboard accompaniment” and “keyboard skills are essential to the whole teaching process.” Previous research has noted the importance of piano skills for Chinese music teachers (Y. M. Yang, 2013) and the substantial development of piano education more broadly in China (J. J. Yang, 2012). Practical skill development remains a critical component of initial music teacher education (Ballantyne & Packer, 2004; Conway, 2022), and there is an opportunity for future research to compare the practical needs of Chinese music teachers to those in other countries.

Given the overall positivity and high value of subjects in their initial music teacher education, it is not surprising that early-career teachers did not report many negative aspects of their university study. A reoccurring criticism, however, was that theoretical knowledge was disconnected from the practicalities of the classroom. Lan reported, “The students I met were different from the students in my books.” Qing agreed, saying, “it is difficult to use a unified theory to put it into practice.” Previous literature regarding teacher education in China has documented the emphasis on music theory and history in initial teacher education (Hu, 2021; Z. C. Li, 2010; Min & Le, 2012; Y. Yang, 2022a; Yin & Guo, 2014) and argued that music teaching cannot be learned merely by reading about teaching but rather via continuous practice and reflection (X. Q. Wang, 2020). Similar arguments have been made in other contexts, such as the teaching of essential core practices studied in approximation to real life (Abramo, 2016). We support the call for developing adaptive expertise in initial teacher education, where preservice teachers learn to create solutions to pedagogical problems in a variety of possible future contexts (Conway, 2019; Haston, 2018).

## Conclusion

Early-career music teachers in this study highly valued their initial teacher education and believed that their university study adequately prepared them for work. However, these beginning teachers noted there is an opportunity to improve the effectiveness of initial teacher education, which includes improvements to the quality of tertiary teaching and contextualisation and integration of theory and practice. It was found that teachers in this study embrace the profession's challenges and find them rewarding, especially music performance and teaching competitions which warrant further investigation. Practical music performance and teaching subjects remain the most beneficial components of music teacher education. Despite choirs being the most rewarding aspect of early-career teachers' work, there is no dedicated subject for choral education in the music teacher education curriculum and should be considered for future course revisions. It is noted that this study only investigated the 12 core subjects of the *National Curriculum Guidance Programme for Undergraduate Courses in Musicology (Teacher Education)* (Ministry of Education, China, 2001), and there is an opportunity to reconsider the musical needs of Chinese children and young people 20 years on from its conception. Such a review could deliberate diversifying pedagogy and the curriculum to include greater emphasis on popular music so that teachers feel empowered to teach the knowledge and skills of music students listen to and perform beyond the classroom (Ho, 2016, 2017). Music technology plays a vital role in making music in this genre (J. C. W. Chen, 2012) and should be integrated across all subjects in any contemporary music teacher education course. These findings only represent the status of initial music teacher education in one university, and future research would benefit from investigating a range of music teacher education programs in China using a larger sample size.

## Authors' Note

Han Meng and Jason Goopy are now affiliated to Edith Cowan University, Australia.

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