Improving learning in a professional context: a research perspective on the new music teacher

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Abstract

Music Teacher Education is often the brunt of attacks regarding lack of preparation for teaching. This study try to illuminate the perceptions held by beginning music teachers regarding how they learn to be teachers, and to address concerns that arise from their practical experience. The report we present here includes information gathered by means of in-depth interviews given to several teachers in different Spanish music conservatoires. The findings reveal that new conservatoire teachers are concerned about knowing how to teach, and they use their teaching practice as an opportunity through which to develop an initial repertoire of teaching abilities.

1. Introduction

As teaching is a highly skilled and complex profession which depends on teachers’ knowledge and skills, the art of learning how to teach and the process of becoming a teacher are often found in educational research.

Examination of the lives of beginning teachers is a common strand of inquiry within general education studies. Research into teacher education, and particularly regarding beginning teachers, is well documented with many studies investigating teacher education and teacher induction programs (Algozzine, Gretes, Queen & Cowan-Hathco, 2007; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Joseph & Heading, 2010; Lampert, 2010; McNally et al., 2010; Van den Berg, 2002; Webster-Wright, 2009; Zumwalt, 1989).

These studies have identified and explored the issues that range from sequencing curriculum, theories of learning, classroom discipline, motivating students, dealing with individual differences, assessing students’ work, relations with parents and colleagues, organizing class work, to insufficient materials and supplies, problems with individual students, and helping teachers understand the links between their personal and professional lives and student learning.
Whilst music educators have tended to respond to recommendations and issues raised in other areas of educational research, researchers have not pursued the concerns of beginning music teachers within a framework of formal research and separately from the general field of education.

According to Conkling (2003), within music education there is a considerable body of research focused on the period known as ‘student teaching’, but there is a lack of research about the way in which beginning music teachers make sense of learning to teach during their initial teaching practice.

Over the last few years, music educators have begun to explore how these beginning teachers develop teaching strategies, make pedagogical decisions and learn to face the complex issues that they encounter once they begin working in schools (Bennet & Stanberg, 2006; Conway, Micheel-Mays & Micheel-Mays, 2005; Conway, 2010; Devries, 2000; Dolloff, 1999; Georgii-Hemming & Westval, 2010; Haston & Russell, 2011; Thompson, 2007; Upitis, Smithrin & Soren, 1999; Yourn, 2000).

Nevertheless, beginning music teachers who work at conservatoires do not seem to be a priority for music researchers, and it is very difficult to find specific research about how musicians approach teaching as their profession.

An understanding that teaching is not the first job expectation of musicians has been already illustrated (Bennett & Stanberg, 2006; Díaz & Vicente, 2010; Mills, 2004a, 2004b; Vicente, 2008): they described their identity as ‘performer’ or ‘musician’, rather than ‘teacher’, but in fact many of these musicians finally choose to enter the teaching profession. Teaching knowledge is complex, and this initial lack of interest in teaching on the part of those who identify principally as musicians cannot justify the absence of formal research in this specific field of music education.

Consequently, with the intention of informing current and future practice, the main aim of this study was to identify the concerns of beginning music teachers at conservatoires in order to encourage a deeper level of interpretation and professional growth. The intention of our work is to illuminate the perceptions held by beginning music teachers regarding how they learn to be teachers, and to address concerns that arise by confronting the day-to-day challenges in a conservatoire classroom.

2. Teaching at the conservatoire: the research

The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions of new conservatoire teachers regarding initial teaching practice and the place of musical and pedagogical knowledge in these first encounters with real teaching. The research was focused upon these research questions:

(a) What are the experiences and perceptions of these new teachers regarding their first year working at the conservatoire?
(b) What are the difficulties and challenges that musicians must face at the beginning of their teaching career?
(c) How do they tackle the teaching demands? With what resources?

According to these questions, the study sought to achieve the following goals:

1. To describe the most significant experiences for new conservatoire teachers that took place during their first year of teaching.
2. To analyze their expectations before entering the teaching profession and whether they were fulfilled or not.
3. To identify the main problems and concerns that musicians deal with as beginning teachers at the conservatoire.

After compiling a list of possible participants from several conservatoires in Andalusia in Southern Spain, thirty new conservatoire teachers were invited to participate in our study. Andalusia is the region with the largest network of conservatoires in Spain. In 2012 this network includes 277 centers: 48 Elementary conservatoires, 24 Professional conservatoires and 5 High conservatoires. The latter are not included in our study because with the current regulations, beginning teachers cannot work at this level.

Our intention was to obtain a wide group of participants that included the following characteristics:
- Different professional profile (in charge of theoretical-practical subjects)
- Different work place (elementary-professional conservatoire)
- Gender (female-male teachers)
- Type of contract (permanent-substitute teachers)

Finally, of the thirty teachers invited to participate, ten agreed to take part in the study. This group includes the following profiles (presented as pseudonyms in order to remain anonymous):
Since this study was based on a desire to know the real situation of the participants, as researchers we assumed that individuals create their own social realities through interaction between self and society, and that a qualitative approach would allow us to gain closer access to the experiences and perceptions we were interested in.

Consequently, the model we proposed was based on the personal experiences of ten teachers in their first year of teaching. The qualitative data collection, mainly based on semi-structured interviews, provided the basis for a more grounded narrative approach, as these teachers sought to construct their professional identities over their decisive first year.

Although the total research project included two extended individual interviews with each of the ten participants, we herein present the results of the first round of interviews held during the period between November 2009 and June 2010. All participants were aware of the research questions and goals for the study, and they were informed about the use of pseudonymity in order to assure their anonymity in the final report.

Analysis was carried out initially by studying the interview transcripts. Both researchers involved with the study analyzed the 5 individual interview transcripts of the interviews he or she conducted, as well as the other 5 from the other researcher, and after that we compared our analyses. This provided data analysis triangulation as we separately returned to the research questions and searched for meaning in the data before coming together to discuss emergent themes. In order to address the validity of this study, we also checked the information with the participants, giving them the opportunity to review the findings and discussion sections of the study.

3. Research findings

The results provided here represent the perspectives of the new conservatoire teachers involved in this project. Analysis of the interviews identified three areas of particular interest:

3.1. Pedagogical knowledge vs Instrument mastery:

Some of the teachers interviewed did not give much importance to didactic questions and, regarding their ability to teach, many of them stated that this ability could be acquired through practice or thanks to the natural aptitude of certain individuals:

I have hardly any experience giving classes but in the two months I’ve been teaching I’ve learned to deal with the situations that arise in class; you could say that it’s a question of practice … (Charlotte, piano teacher)

There are people who don’t need any previous training in order to teach, because they have a natural skill for this … (Alice, music theory teacher)

Many of those interviewed agreed that in order to be a teacher it is enough to have a solid knowledge of the subject to be taught. Even without previous experience, knowledge of the subject is perceived as the most important requirement to be a teacher, as can be seen in the following statement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Speciality</th>
<th>Conservatoire</th>
<th>Employment contract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Guitar</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Substitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Trumpet</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Substitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Clarinet</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dany</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Piano</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Substitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Piano</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Flute</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Substitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrian</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Violin</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Music theory</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Music theory</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Substitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Singing</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The pupils have to see that you are a good musician and that you can really play your instrument. I think that if my pupils saw that I don’t play the violin very well they wouldn’t respect me or value my classes… (Adrian, violin teacher)

3.2. Induction for beginning music teachers:
According to what the participants stated, we can say that almost none of them took part in a formal induction process at the conservatoire; nevertheless, they participated in some informal induction experiences in which the support of their colleagues was very important.

This informal induction took place in two spheres: induction to the institution in general and induction to teaching in particular. Induction to the institution took place with the support of colleagues through informal explanations about the way the conservatoire worked, the resources available, administrative questions, etc.:

The principal of the conservatoire helped me a lot at the beginning, particularly in the use of the Seneca computer programme which I had to use check student attendance, grades etc. and which I had never used before. (Eric, music theory teacher)

Regarding induction to teaching in particular, the teachers interviewed again referred to informal situations; among these we can highlight the support received from more experienced colleagues. The induction consisted of some general guidelines about the job and also the sharing of teaching experience and even teaching materials with the new teacher:

One of my colleagues in the department gave me a list with a lot of opera arias classified in terms of their level of difficulty which was very useful when I had to choose material for my pupils; this teacher also lent me some books about vocal technique that she normally used. (Esther, singing teacher)

An important question concerning induction that arose in the interviews is the personal and even emotional support offered to be teachers by more experienced colleagues and those interviewed thoroughly appreciated this help:

My colleagues were very friendly to me and this helped me to relax when I started working. (John, trumpet teacher)

3.3. Main concerns about teaching music:
In terms of the problems faced by beginning teachers in dealing with the diverse factors related to teaching, in the case of the participants in this study, their first steps in the profession have led them to face some of the following difficulties:

a) Trying to motivate pupils about this subject: in this question, the interviews revealed how surprised the participants were by the different reasons that pupils had for studying in a conservatoire and their different levels of motivation:

In the music theory classes, some pupils always had a bad attitude, and it seems that they don’t understand that this subject is fundamental for them to make progress with their instrument. Some of them even tell you that what they want to do is play, not waste time studying theory …” (Alice. Music theory teacher)

b) Suitability of their working space: although in this question their opinions were not particularly critical, it is worthwhile to reflect on what they think about this as it helps us to understand the different problems faced by each type of conservatoire:

I enjoy working with elementary pupils and the atmosphere in the conservatoire is good as there are not many of us. The main problem that I see in these small centers is that we are limited in terms of resources. For example, the classrooms are not sound-proofed and you can imagine the problems that this causes. (Barbara, guitar teacher)

c) Repercussion of their teaching activity on their future as musicians: although all of the participants stated that they were satisfied with the job they were doing, in the interviews there were several references to how they see their professional future, from which we can deduce that for some of them it is important to combine their devotion to teaching with their careers as musicians:

I need to continue studying. I like playing and I want to keep on learning and take all of the opportunities that I get to perform in public. (Jane, flute teacher)
4. Conclusion

A very significant question that arose in the interviews was the importance that all of the teachers gave to mastery of an instrument as the key to teaching it. These beliefs reveal the underlying philosophy of these teachers: they think teaching music consists of giving pupils a high level of knowledge of the theoretical and practical subjects that they are studying; therefore, the teacher or those who aspire to become teachers should be especially knowledgeable in these questions: once they have this knowledge they can teach. Previous ideas about teaching expressed by teachers reveal that new teachers usually considered it an easy job in comparison to other professions, and these ideas were supported by the image that society as a whole has of teaching as a simple job that requires little effort. Teaching is one of the most familiar professions due to the direct contact that we have with this activity from an early age as pupils. Perceiving teaching as a routine activity leads to a lack of prestige as is viewed as a simple task which anybody could perform.

In relation to the informal induction processes mentioned by those interviewed, we agree with Campbell et al. (2010) that the fact that beginning teachers belong to a community during their teaching practice is of great significance since this community offers them support and guidance and acts as a complement to this training period. In addition to belonging to this educational community, we must consider in line with McNally et al. (2010) that “the emotional dimensions are much more prevalent in the first months of induction” (p.19), therefore this type of induction should be considered more often in order to encourage the benefits of the relationships that emerge between beginning and experienced teachers.

As teachers begin to acquire professional experience, they gradually understand the real complexity of teaching and it is then that we find changes in both teaching practice and in the ideas that underlie it.

For these teachers, it is important to have a proper repertoire of strategies that will help them to teach with confidence and to enjoy their job, and to feel that every day that they devote to teaching is a day in which they learn something new. Little by little, they discover the complexity of teaching, especially in the case of music, where it is essential to teach taking into account individual differences.

Furthermore, these teachers need to keep working as musicians and not stop performing once they become teachers.

5. References


