

# Reality Check: A Case Study of Teacher-Candidates' Music Practicum Experiences

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## Abstract

This case study examined music teacher-candidates' views on their practicum experiences by employing Integrated Inquiry, a multiple-perspectives methodology. Participants in the study completed *Currere*, a visioning exercise, prior to and after their first supervised music teaching experience in the practicum. Prior to their practicum, teacher-candidates commented that the value of music in education must be more effectively communicated to the public, the local community solicited to support programs, and research utilized to explain the benefits of music instruction. To engage a larger percentage of the school population, music programs must offer a greater variety of courses and foster student input in the curricular decision-making. Music teachers must broaden their expertise and stay connected with the local professional music community. After the practicum, the candidates emphasized the importance of personal adaptation to the classroom context. They realized that each class is unique, and they had to develop more effective ways of teaching and motivating students if they were going to create a vibrant music program for their school. Such a program would be inclusive, promote diversity, and include popular and world musics, in addition to music of the Western tradition.

**Keywords:** music practicum experiences; music education value

## **1. The Context of Music Teacher Education**

In Ontario, unlike many other jurisdictions in Canada and the United States which require music degrees, teacher-candidates in most of the faculties of education need only complete an undergraduate degree with five music courses to obtain certification to teach music in the Intermediate (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a) and Senior (Ontario Ministry of Education 2010b) divisions (i.e., grades 7-10 and 11-12, respectively), or three music courses to teach music in the Intermediate division (grades 7-10). Consequently, many music teacher-candidates undertake supervised music teaching for the first time during their practicum in a Bachelor of Education program (B.Ed.), generally referred to as Teacher Education. For many of them, this experience can be life-changing, especially for those who have a traditional Western musical background and very little experience with popular music or world musics. The Western tradition is focused on music literacy and performing music in bands, choirs, orchestras and chamber ensembles. In contrast, the popular music that young people experience represents an oral tradition which involves group composition, improvisation, small groups, and a diversity of musical styles, such as rock (and its derivatives such as heavy metal, soft rock, etc.), folk, rhythm and blues, country and western, and more recently hip-hop and rap. Moreover, electronics is a significant component of this music with the development of synthesizers, multi-media stations, and digital sampling.

## **2. Methodology**

This inquiry employed Integrated Inquiry (Andrews, 2008a), a multiple-perspectives methodology. This methodology involves analyzing and integrating data; that is, data collected from implementing a protocol in different time periods (e.g., Andrews, 2012, 2014), from implementing multiple protocols, qualitative and/or quantitative (e.g., Andrews, 2008b, 2010), or alternately, from using a protocol which contains inter-related qualitative and quantitative dimensions (Andrews, 2002). In this study, a single protocol was implemented in two different time periods and the data compared and integrated.

The protocol adopted in this study was Currere, a visioning exercise, which was implemented as a pre and post practicum exercise. Currere is a form of research, developed by the reconceptualist William Pinar (1975, 1980, 1988, 2000, 2004), which focuses on examining past practices, imagining an ideal future, and reconciling the two with the realities of the present. Seventeen teacher-candidates completed the visioning exercise at the outset of their teacher education program, and fifteen of them completed the exercise again after their first music practicum in the fall session of their Teacher Education program. Two of the teacher-candidates did not participate in the post-practicum component of the study as they did not undertake a music practicum in the first practicum (Note 1). The data was analyzed using comparative analysis (after Stake, 1995 and Cisneros-Cohernour & Stake, 2012) using NVivo computer software, a technique appropriate for the analysis of case study data.

### *2.1 Pre-Practicum Views*

**Re-create Past.** All the teacher-candidates enrolled in music in their schooling and most had private lessons. Some mentioned the sacrifices made by their families to fund these lessons in order to reach their full musical potential. Most commenced their musical training at a very young age, and only one teacher-candidate started later at age 12. They enjoyed the lessons, although a few had unhappy experiences because of negative reinforcement. In senior public or secondary school, they could either select vocal or instrumental but not both. Their programs were dominated by performance with insufficient attention to music theory and history. However, they enjoyed the benefits of performance – the attention by parents and the public, the music excursions, the social interaction with peers, and the sheer joy of playing in a large ensemble. Their music teachers were strong role models and their positive example encouraged many of their students to pursue a career in music education.

**The Ideal Future.** The teacher-candidates indicated that the ideal music program would be well-funded and supported by the local community. In their view, social justice and equity issues would be integrated into the music curriculum. Every young person would have the opportunity to enrol in music classes and study a broad range of musics – traditional, popular and indigenous. A key feature of the ideal curriculum would be the successful integration of music theory and history with performance. Finally, music teachers need to be well-prepared for the challenges (e.g., antic-racism, gender equity) of a pluralistic society.

**Present Obstacles.** Almost all of the teacher-candidates expressed the concern about the inadequate funding for music programs. They also noted the focus on mathematics and sciences in schools and the lack of appreciation of the value of music in education. There is a lack of history and theory integrated into the curricula and an emphasis on performance at the expense of improvisation, creativity and critical listening. The focus in student evaluation is on measurement rather than professional judgement. Consequently, the arts, which require qualitative assessments, are ignored in favour of literacy and numeracy testing.

**Integration.** There was a strong consensus that the public should be educated on the value of music in education, the local community should be solicited to support school music programs, and current research should be used to support this goal. Students need more choices in their programs, such as guitar, computer music, synthesizer, popular music, and world musics, in addition to the traditional vocal and instrumental classes. Students must be encouraged to provide input and assist with curricular decision-making. Music teachers must be well-educated in a variety of musical styles, and learn how to integrate technology into the curriculum. Above-all they need to stay connected with the professional community for support and professional growth.

### *2.2 Post-Practicum Views*

**Re-create the Practicum.** After a four-week practicum, the teacher-candidates related their experiences teaching music in the Intermediate (grades 7-10) and Senior divisions (grades 11-12) in Ottawa, Ontario, and the surrounding area. Their comments focused on the nature of music instruction, the associates' teaching styles, and student assessment.

Generally, the students were positive about their practicum and experienced supportive classrooms in which they were encouraged to design and deliver their own lessons. As a teacher-candidate commented: “I experienced a warm environment where staff and students were open to my ideas and gladly engaged in them.” Another stated: “I was also given the opportunity to plan and supervise a field trip for the senior music students which was an incredible learning experience.”

Overall, the instruction in the practicum was teacher-directed and comprised music instruction characterized by an emphasis on technical proficiency and performance – characteristics of music education in the Western tradition.

I taught a beginner music class during my practicum and provided warm-up and technical drills for four other courses (grades 9-12). I taught basic theory but focused mainly on performance and technical development.

And ...

In the theory class, the students study ear training, musical elements, history, composition, scale writing, and so forth. Also, the first class of every week they work in the keyboard lab on their piano skills. They need to pass a piano proficiency exam before graduating from grade 12.

However, there was some room for experimentation, although it was limited. For example, a teacher-candidate commented that she was “able to teach the classes ‘special’ lessons and assignments, such as a body percussion rhythm lesson, and evaluate a ‘discovery’ (composition) project.” The teacher-candidates related opposing views on their associates’ teaching styles. There were those that demonstrated an autocratic approach. For example:

Ms. Reed (Note 2) exemplified the coercive model magnificently. Her rapport with the students was strictly business ... The students’ respect for her was rooted in fear of reprisal, either academically or socially ... She routinely read out their marks in front of the whole class, or made calls home to parents while the rest of the class sat listening.

And in contrast, those that were democratic. For example:

Mr. Martin ... relied more heavily (though never exclusively) on referent power to command the respect of his students – expecting his students to reciprocate the respect that he shows to them.

The teacher-candidates commented on the amount of time in the curriculum focused on evaluation and the detailed tracking of student progress. They observed that the “students were aware of what kind of progress was needed to achieve certain levels, for example, successfully completing six pages from the keyboard practice by the end of the session would earn the students a ‘3’ in practice” (Note 3). However, they noted that the assessments tended to emphasize elaborate tracking schemes. For example, in one particular case feedback was received after every page in a theory workbook, and in another case students were assessed “on every scale and study.” The excessive focus on technical proficiency dominated the

schedule and reduced the time available for musical creativity.

**An Ideal Future.** The candidates noted that in an ideal music program, music teachers would have the opportunity to experiment and implement lessons on the creative aspects of music, such as improvisation and composition. Their work-loads would be equalized with other staff to take into consideration extra-curricular duties. Above-all, the participants indicated that music teachers must be flexible and willing to adapt to a broad range of different classroom environments.

Reaching students where they are in terms of their musical interest is always important, and if this means adapting your personal pedagogy, then so be it, because we are there for the benefit of the students not ourselves.

**Present Obstacles.** The teacher-candidates reflected on the obstacles present in their practicum situation that they experienced which they would need to address in their own teaching situation. Their primary challenge was classroom management. As one candidate commented: “There were a lot of non-music related things going on in the classroom ... students were naturally distracted ... having an instrument in their hands.” There were also concerns raised about the reciprocity between classroom discipline and effective instruction, that the former could negatively affect the latter, and the latter could also cause the former.

I need to work on classroom management so as to find a balance between having fun and complete chaos in my classroom. I also need to work on learning when to focus on small scale musical concepts (phrasing, articulation, etc.), and when to back up and look at the bigger picture (note, rhythms, etc.).

Another surprise for many candidates was the lack of musical resources and equipment. Students could not participate in instrumental music unless they could afford to rent an instrument. If instruments were provided, they were required to share them. Student apathy was also problematic. In one situation, “most of the students could really have cared less how they were doing in class because they were more concerned with their personal lives.” More disconcerting was that “a majority of the students did not practice nor did their parents sign their books.”

**Integration.** The teacher-candidates emphasized the importance of adaptation to the classroom context in reconciling their practicum experiences - the realities of professional practice - with an ideal music program. They came to understand “that every class is different,” and each one requires different teaching strategies to ensure effective instruction. The candidates realized that “coming up with new ways to motivate and encourage students would help learning” and improve their practice. They articulated the need for collaboration among teachers and student-teachers within a school and the importance of effective communication to facilitate the practicum experience. Moreover, the candidates indicated that commonly accepted norms, such as mandatory enrolment in a course qualifies a student for an extra-curricular ensemble, need to be re-examined if music programs are to reach a broader base of students. They found that music education engages a small percentage of the student population, and consequently, the profession should seek new ways to become more

inclusive in its course offerings.

If competitiveness, exclusiveness and a focus on high achievement is necessary for the sake of showcasing the program (and thus possibly maintaining funding), then an alternative needs to be available for students who can't meet the stands.

### **3. Comparative Analysis and Integration of the Data**

**Re-create Past.** Prior to undertaking the practicum, the teacher-candidates expressed concern about the emphasis on performance with insufficient attention paid to music theory and history in their own musical education during their childhood and youth. However, they very much enjoyed music classes and performing in public because of the attention, travel, and social interaction with peers. They also indicated that their music teachers were strong role models who encouraged them to pursue a music career. After teaching music in the practicum for four weeks, they commented that instruction in the practicum was teacher-directed, the musical content was based on the Western tradition, and the emphasis in instruction was on technical proficiency. Their associate teachers demonstrated both autocratic (the majority) and democratic (the minority) instructional styles. Assessment of music theory, history and performance was complex, and it involved a considerable amount of documentation and tracking to demonstrate that students achieved the curricular outcomes specified in Ontario Ministry of Education documents (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, 2010b).

**An Ideal Future.** Prior to the practicum, the teacher-candidates described the ideal music program as well-funded and supported by the local community. All students would have the opportunity to enroll in music classes and popular and indigenous music would be studied, alongside the traditional Western approach. Theory and history would be effectively integrated into the curriculum and teachers would be well-prepared and capable of addressing contemporary issues, such as social justice and equity, within their music programs. After the four-week practicum, participants commented that music teachers in an ideal program would deliver lessons that focused on improvisation and composition and work-loads would be equalized with other teachers to take into account extra-curricular duties. Most importantly, future teachers would be flexible and willing to adapt to promote inclusivity, diversity, and alternate musics into their music programs.

**Present Obstacles.** Prior to the practicum, teacher-candidates expressed concern about the inadequate funding for music, the lack of theory and history taught, the emphasis on performance at the expense of improvisation, creativity and critical listening, and the focus on measurement rather than professional judgment in evaluation. After four weeks in the practicum, the candidates identified classroom management as the central problem in music instruction, primarily due to large classes and musical activities involving a variety of instruments. They were also surprised by the lack of music resources and equipment in the schools, and the necessity for many students to share or rent instruments to participate in a music program.

**Integration.** Prior to the practicum experience, teacher-candidates commented that the value



of music in education must be more effectively communicated to the public, the local community solicited to support programs, and research utilized to explain the benefits of music instruction to the education stakeholders. To engage a larger percentage of the school population, music programs must offer a greater variety of courses and foster student input into the curricular decision-making. Music teachers must broaden their expertise and stay connected with the local professional music community. After the practicum, the candidates emphasized the importance of personal adaptation to the classroom context. They realized that each class is unique, and they had to develop more effective ways of teaching and motivating students if they were going to create a vibrant music program for their school. Such a program would be inclusive, promote diversity, and include popular (e.g., hip hop, rap) and world musics (e.g., Inuit throat music, celtic folk songs), in addition to music of the Western tradition (i.e., band, choir, orchestra, chamber groups).

#### **4. Concluding Comments**

Teacher-candidates experienced a significant shift in their attitudes and beliefs towards music education after teaching in the practicum for a four-week period during their Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) certification program. The realities of practice forced them to re-evaluate how a vibrant, student-oriented program can be implemented given the constraints of practice. However, the evidence suggests that they realized the importance of adaptability in teaching; that is, the willingness to develop music programs that respond directly to the needs of the school community and teaching strategies that are appropriate for a diverse student population.

The findings of this study suggest that teacher certification programs should broaden their curricula to include a broader range of musics, provide teacher-candidates with a variety of teaching strategies to adapt their teaching to diverse populations, and emphasize personal life-long learning as essential for effective educational practice. However, it is cautioned that the inquiry reported herein is a small-scale study and replication is recommended. In addition, further inquiry on the identification and implementation of alternate programs and teaching strategies could benefit the music education profession in responding to the needs of a pluralistic society.

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## Notes

Note 1. In the one-year Bachelor of Education programs in Ontario, there are generally two practica – each four weeks in duration. Where possible, teacher-candidates are placed in their primary teaching area in the fall session and in their secondary area in the winter session.

Note 2. All names in quotations in this study are pseudonyms.

Note 3. A ‘3’ indicates a student has met the expectations for achieving the outcomes outlined in documents Ontario Ministry of Education (2010a, b). Level 1 indicates a student requires remedial assistance; level 2 indicates achievement is below expectations; and level 4 indicates achievement exceeds expectations.

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