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Preservice Music Teachers Reflect on First Experiences in Elementary Classrooms

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Abstract

Changes that took place in the perceptions of 18 preservice music teachers during their first experiences performing and teaching in two different field experiences in elementary music classrooms were examined. Following each experience, preservice music teachers were asked to individually view recordings of their lessons, analyze the experience using specially designed observation forms, select two 12- to 15-minute excerpts (one labeled by the participant as "good" and the other as "not so good"), and write reflection paragraphs for each excerpt. The reflection paragraphs were analyzed by coding the ideas discussed in each paragraph as positive, negative, or neutral using the categories for teachers (use of strategies, affect, music skills and knowledge, other) and students (music skills and knowledge, social skills, affect, other). Of all statements, 75% were related to preservice music teachers' perceptions of themselves as teachers and only 25% were related to their students' behaviors. Participants' perceptions of their young students' music performances and students' social behaviors were more positive in Experience II than in Experience I. In addition, the preservice music teacher comments conveyed more positive affect related to the use of their own teaching strategies and expressed less negative affect overall.

Keywords

preservice, music, self-observation, reflection, elementary

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Introduction and Review of Literature

Teacher preparation programs are designed to prepare preservice music teachers for successful careers in the field of education. This is accomplished through several different means, including providing preservice music teachers with opportunities to read and discuss the literature regarding principles of effective teaching and learning (e.g., Duke, 2004; Duke & Henninger, 1998; Goolsby, 1997); providing preservice music teachers with multiple opportunities to apply the pedagogical approaches described in the literature, observed in schools, and discussed in classes while teaching their university peers (Abeles, Hoffer, & Klotman, 1995; Elliott, 1995); and designing field experiences that enable preservice music teachers to interact with expert teachers and diverse student populations, thereby gaining greater insight into the dynamics of classroom teaching (Abeles et al., 1995; Abril, 2006; Belz, 2006; Elliott, 1995).

These areas do not represent everything involved in the entire preparation process of future educators, nor will this article be able to fully address all those components. There are, however, three important areas within teacher training programs that represent components of the present study: a personal awareness of and appreciation for the different stages of the teacher developmental process (Duke, 1994; Sheldon, 2005; Torff, 2003); opportunities for in-depth analysis, study, and discussion of teaching principles (Berliner, 1986; Duke & Henninger, 1998; Duke & Madsen, 1991; Goolsby, 1997; Kuhn & Moore, 1975); and reflection through self-observation (Barrett & Rasmussen, 1996; Duke, 1994; Greenfield, 1978; Prickett, 1987).

The Teacher Developmental Process

For the majority of preservice music teachers, the development of effective teaching skills is a gradual process. Students in the early stages (e.g., freshmen) of preservice careers demonstrate and perceive teaching and learning differently than do those who are approaching the completion of a program (e.g., seniors). This is most easily noted in the analysis of higher order thinking skills. Studies conducted within and outside the field of music education that examine the development of higher order thinking skills have found that preservice teaching candidates tend to be more descriptive, inferential, and student centered than prospective music education majors and teachers with lower levels of expertise (Sheldon, 2005; Torff, 2003).

Sheldon (2005) analyzed the observation and thinking skills of prospective music education majors (high school seniors planning on majoring in music education) and upperclassmen preservice teachers enrolled in a music education program. Participants viewed a videotape and wrote statements of observation that were later analyzed according to their factual and inferential content. Preservice teachers wrote more descriptive and inferential statements than did the prospective music education majors, which Sheldon interpreted as evidence of higher order thinking skills and a more student-centered approach to teaching among more experienced students. The findings of the researcher suggested that with additional time and instruction, students are capable of developing observation skills that lead them to draw greater inferences and become more cognizant of student behaviors in an instructional setting.

Torff (2003) examined the classroom practices of novice, experienced, and expert social studies teachers. Consistent with Sheldon's (2005) definition of higher order thinking skills, Torff identified teaching approaches that contained higher order thinking skills as those that were student centered and not curriculum centered. In other words, the frequency with which one focused on the student within a lesson was an indicator of an approach that displayed the use of thinking skills that were directed toward the student and more inferential. The results of this study indicated that a teacher's expertise had a direct effect on the presence of higher order thinking skills while teaching a lesson, with expert teachers delivering lessons that displayed a higher level of higher order thinking skills than the lessons of novice and experienced teachers.

In an earlier study, Duke (1994) found a similar positive correlation between teaching expertise and the presence of higher order thinking skills. Duke presented experienced teachers with video recordings of their own student teaching experiences. When asked to evaluate aspects of their teaching, Duke found that more experienced teachers provided fewer comments about themselves (the teacher) and wrote more negative comments about the quality of the student behaviors and performances observed. These findings provide evidence that as teachers gain more experience and greater levels of expertise, their observations become more student centered and less teacher centered. This student-centered approach to teaching is what educators in teacher preparation programs encourage preservice teachers to demonstrate when effectively teaching.

Teaching Principles

To develop this student-focused approach to teaching, preservice teachers should have many opportunities to practice teaching with their peers in a more controlled setting (i.e., on campus with limited variables to attend to during an instructional period). While developing these pedagogical skills in the presence of one's peers and professors, time should be spent on improving the quality of instruction (Duke & Madsen, 1991; Kuhn & Moore, 1975), the frequency and delivery of feedback (Duke & Henninger, 1998), and overall teaching effectiveness (Goolsby, 1997).

Unlike novice and preservice teachers, expert teachers consistently provide a proactive approach to learning, demonstrate flexibility, and focus on fundamental aspects of performance while accomplishing music goals (Berliner, 1986; Duke & Madsen, 1991). These elements of effective instruction enable expert teachers to lead students to the successful accomplishment of music goals (Duke, 2004).

Feedback is another aspect of teaching that is frequently addressed in teacher preparation programs. Research has shown that expert teachers provide more feedback to their students than do nonexperts and that this feedback is more specific and can have a positive effect on student learning (Duke & Henninger, 1998; Goolsby, 1997). Goolsby (1997) examined the rehearsals of band directors with varying levels of experience (i.e., preservice, novice, and experience) and found that in addition to providing more specific feedback, directors with greater levels of experience also spent more time addressing fundamental aspects of performance and provided negative feedback directed toward making positive changes in student performances.

Using a variety of feedback statements and directives can be effective in leading students to the accomplishment of music goals and objectives. Duke and Henninger (1998) found that elementary and university students who received negative feedback (i.e., feedback that informed students of errors made in a previous performance trial) during a recorder lesson demonstrated similar levels of performance achievement and attitudes toward the learning experience as did those who received directives (i.e., telling students how to improve performance in a subsequent trial). All learners also received contingent positive feedback throughout the lesson based on the quality of each performance trial. Therefore, to effect positive change in a student's performance, one should be willing to use positive feedback, negative feedback (without any negative emotion), and directives throughout the teaching and learning process.

Self-Observation and Reflection

Observation has been used in education to improve preservice and applied music teachers' instructional effectiveness (Arnold, 1991; Barrett & Rasmussen, 1996; Benson, 1989; Prickett, 1987) and teacher intensity (Colwell, 1995). In addition to reading relevant literature and practicing teaching with their peers, many teacher preparation programs provide preservice teachers with opportunities to record, observe, and reflect on teaching experiences on campus and in the schools. When comparing the observation tendencies of preservice teachers to those of their academic and educational supervisors, research has found that, regardless of the setting, preservice teachers tend to evaluate themselves more positively than do their supervisors (Cassidy, 1993; Madsen & Duke, 1985). These disparities in qualities of observations may be attributed to the different experience levels that exist between a student and his or her teacher.

Self-observation research outside education has yielded similar results (Alley, 1980; Greenfield, 1978; Hanser & Furman, 1980). In the field of music therapy, self-observation and self-analysis of videotapes have been used to develop competencies in music therapy. Similar to the methodology typically found in teacher preparation programs, students majoring in music therapy were given opportunities to record and analyze their performance of specific practicum competencies within that field. Research has shown that students evaluated the quality of their work more positively than did their instructors (Alley, 1980; Greenfield, 1978). This discrepancy in ability and expertise levels may contribute to the differences in perceptions of students and their instructors.

Similar to the methodology used in the present study, research within the field of music education has also shown that students tend to evaluate the quality and content of their performances differently than do their instructors and other independent observers (Cassidy, 1993; Wang & Sogin, 1997). When describing the content of their teaching, Wang and Sogin (1997) found that teachers' perceptions of what occurred in their classrooms differed from the findings of independent observers. General music teachers observed during this study thought they provided their students with more opportunities to sing (50% of a lesson) than they actually did (18% of a lesson).

Cassidy (1993) also found that music education majors, after teaching and recording four lessons, evaluated the quality and accuracy of instruction more positively than did their instructor. The participants also "identified more instances of good teaching . . . than the experienced observer" (p. 26). These findings illustrate that one's perceptions of the quality and content of one's own teaching is oftentimes different from what actually occurs and is observed by others.

Research inside and outside the field of music education has found that teachers of varying levels of experience differently perceive teaching. How can teacher preparation programs structure field experiences and observation assignments in a manner that best prepares preservice teachers for successful teaching and learning experiences in the music classroom? If a field experience and observation assignment is structured in a manner that enables preservice teachers to participate in a dialogue with their instructor about the quality and content of their experiences teaching in the schools, would this have a positive effect on the teaching and learning observed in a subsequent lesson? We designed a study to examine changes that take place in the perceptions of preservice music teachers during their first experiences performing and teaching in two different field experiences in elementary music classrooms.

Method

The preservice music teachers who participated in this study ($N = 18$) were junior- and senior-level undergraduate students pursuing a bachelor's degree and teacher certification at The University of Texas at Austin. All participants had been recently admitted into the upper division portion of the program, which meant they had completed the majority of their general education requirements, had maintained a specific grade point average, and were beginning the completion of courses directly related to the teaching of music in elementary and secondary schools. All participants were enrolled in a teaching practicum class with the same instructor.

The field experience component of this required upper division course fulfilled a class assignment and was specifically designed to combine participants' established musicianship skills on their principal instrument with newly learned teaching skills in a performance-type format. Students were instructed to accomplish the following goals while completing two performances:

1. Demonstrate a high level of musicianship and accuracy in performances and verbalizations
2. Engage students in a well-planned sequence of activities that is motivating, meaningful, and FUN (not to be confused with frivolous or silly)
3. Include many opportunities for group student participation, including group singing and other music activities

Lessons, which were to be at least 30 minutes in duration, were recorded for subsequent viewing, reflecting, and discussions. The assignment was to be completed with two different classes at the same grade level (most often fifth grade). Based on instruction and feedback provided in the course, each undergraduate student applied concepts learned in the upper division course to written lesson plans and actual experience.

Following each experience, the preservice music teachers were asked to individually view video recordings of their lessons and to analyze the experience using specially designed observation forms. The observation forms prompted participants to evaluate the quality of their preparation, singing skills, accompanying skills, generic teaching skills, and student behavior observed with the use of a yes–no checklist. They were also instructed to gather frequency data on the specific directives and feedback statements given to the group and individual students. In addition, participants responded to questions and statements regarding their overall perceptions of this teaching experience.

In addition to completing the observation forms, participants were instructed to select two 12- to 15-minute excerpts during which they were highly interactive with the children (one labeled by the student as “good” and the other as “not so good”). Following the selection of these two excerpts, participants were instructed to write two reflection paragraphs, one for each excerpt. Shortly after the first experience, individuals and small groups viewed their tapes during tutorials with the course instructor. During these tutorials, teacher and student behaviors were discussed. Preservice music teachers also received feedback regarding the structure of their lesson and ways in which the lesson could be modified to foster a higher level of student success and participation. Preservice music teachers received no feedback about the content of their reflection paragraphs.

A total of 72 paragraphs were available for analysis (4 paragraphs per student). The two authors and the instructor of the course examined “test” paragraphs (not used in this study) to determine categories and patterns to use in the analysis of the paragraphs written by the preservice music teachers in the study. We accomplished this by independently analyzing the content of written statements for 6 randomly selected paragraphs. Each analyzer took independent notes regarding each statement. After discussing our analyses, coding categories were selected and agreed on based on the general content of the majority of statements written by participants.

Ideas were coded as positive, negative, or neutral using the categories of teacher (use of strategies, affect, music skills and knowledge, other) and students (music skills and knowledge, social skills, affect, other). Labels of the experiences as I or II and names were removed for coding. Equal numbers of the 72 paragraphs were randomly assigned to each of the two authors, and the instructor of the course conducted reliability analyses.

Results

A total of 960 statements were coded (Experience I = 446, Experience II = 514). Of the coded paragraphs, 20% (equal numbers of “good” and “not so good” from each of

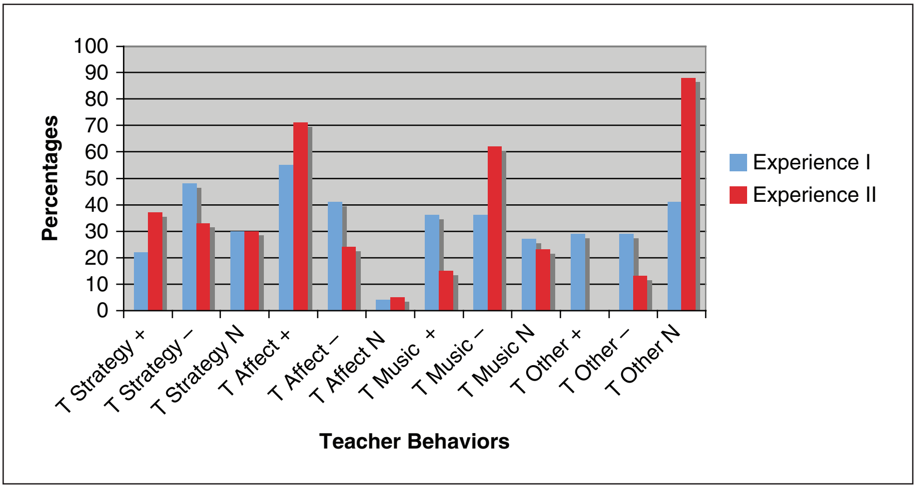

Figure 1. Percentages of perceived teacher behaviors for Experiences I and II

the two author–coders) were used to calculate the reliability for categories. Using Agreements ÷ Agreements + Disagreements and category-by-category comparisons, results yielded an overall reliability of 74% (teacher reliability = 72%, student reliability = 76%).

Frequencies and percentages of teacher and student statements were calculated. Although 75% of all statements were related to preservice music teachers' perceptions of themselves as teachers and only 25% were related to their students' behaviors for Experiences I and II, changes were reflected for several categories between the first and second experiences.

When analyzing the frequencies and percentages of statements of perceived teacher behaviors for both experiences, slight increases were seen in the teacher use of strategies category (Experience I = 74%, Experience II = 76%). A decrease was found in the teacher affect category (Experience I = 15%, Experience II = 10%). Percentages of statements regarding teacher music and other behaviors were similar between experiences. Overall, participants were more positive about their use of strategies (Experience I = 22%, Experience II = 37%) and expressed less negative affect following Experience II (Experience I = 41%, Experience II = 24%). See Figure 1 for percentages of statements of teacher behaviors.

Analyses of frequencies and percentages of statements regarding perceptions of student behaviors indicated changes in perceptions of student music behaviors and student social behaviors (see Figure 2). Participants gave greater attention to the student music behaviors in Experience II (49%) than they had in Experience I (42%). Participants' perceptions of their young students' music performances were more positive in Experience II (55%) than in Experience I (51%). Participants were also more

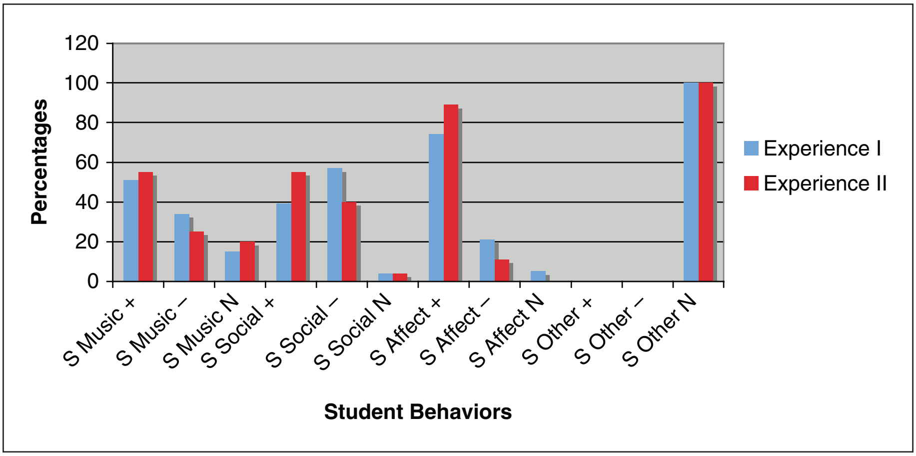

Figure 2. Percentages of perceived student behaviors for Experiences I and II

positive about the students' social behaviors in Experience II (55%) than in Experience I (39%). Percentages of statements for the student affect and student other categories were similar between experiences.

Discussion and Implications

Some of the most important findings of the present study include the following:

- The majority of preservice music teachers' written perceptions addressed aspects of teacher behaviors
- Preservice music teachers were more positive about their use of strategies in Experience II than they were in Experience I
- Preservice music teachers' levels of negative teacher affect decreased from Experience I to Experience II
- Preservice music teachers were more positive about the students' music performances in Experience II than in Experience I
- Preservice music teachers' statements indicated that students' social behaviors improved from Experience I to Experience II

Similar to the findings of earlier studies (e.g., Duke, 1994; Henninger, 2000, 2002, 2008; Sheldon, 2005; Torff, 2003), preservice music teachers' statements of observations were more focused on teacher (i.e., personal) behaviors and less focused on the students. These preservice teachers were junior- and senior-level undergraduate students, and their higher order thinking skills were still developing. Although more attention was given to the quality of student music performances following a meeting with the class instructor, their thinking was still teacher centered. With additional time and training, one may see a shift in the focus of attention toward the student, which should have a positive effect on the quality of instruction delivered.

Participants had an opportunity to view clips of their lessons with the course instructor and received specific feedback regarding the teaching and learning observed. The preservice music teachers were then encouraged to approach their second lesson in the schools with a plan that enabled them to apply feedback received into their teaching so positive changes could occur.

From Experience I to Experience II, participants indicated more positive perceptions of students' performances and social behaviors. Based on the literature previously discussed (e.g., Duke, 1994; Henninger, 2000, 2002; Sheldon, 2005), these aspects of student performances may not have been noticed during the initial observation of the first experience teaching in the schools because attention was so heavily directed toward their own (i.e., teacher) behavior. Again, following the individual meetings with the instructor of the course, participants may have received information regarding the importance of focusing on student behaviors and performances. For teaching to truly occur, time must be taken to address social and academic aspects of student behaviors. In addition, preservice music teachers were reminded of the importance of reinforcing positive social behaviors and accurate music performances and the positive impact of this approach on the quality of student learning. Approaching the teaching of Experience II in this more student-centered manner may have contributed to the positive changes noted in the perceptions of student social and music behaviors.

Although the findings of this study are interesting and illustrate the benefit of field experiences, recording lessons, self-observation, and instructor feedback, one should exercise caution when attempting to generalize these findings to other teacher preparation programs. The preservice music teachers in this study may not be an accurate representation of all undergraduate students enrolled in teacher preparation programs in various regions of the country. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine what part or parts of the entire project were responsible for bringing about the changes observed between the two experiences. For most preservice music teachers, Experience I was the first time they had taught a structured lesson to a group of elementary students. The positive changes that occurred from Experience I to Experience II could also be attributed to the increased level of confidence students may have felt when faced with the opportunity to teach a second lesson in the schools.

Additional research should be conducted in this area to further determine the best way to structure field experiences in teacher preparation programs. Providing undergraduate students with experiences such as those described in the present study may enable them to develop a more student-centered approach to teaching and higher order thinking skills, which will positively affect the learning of their future students.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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