

## The biography of music teachers and their understanding of musicality

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This article describes an ongoing research project with secondary music teachers and teacher trainees in England which forms part of studies for a PhD. The hypothesis on which it is founded is that the educational, environmental, experiential and musical background of secondary music teachers has a significant part to play in the curriculum they present and the manner in which they assess the musicality of their pupils. A 'classically' trained musician, for example, may view the development of musicianship in the young people they may teach in a more traditional manner (eg using notation, developing strict performance technique) than the musician who has developed more informally (eg through improvisation and performance by ear). This paper seeks to explore research into the formation of secondary music teacher and musician identity along with the notion of what it is to be musical.

Keywords: biography; identity; musicality; musicianship; teachers.

### Introduction

This article describes an ongoing research project into how far and in what form the biographies of secondary music teachers in England determine different attitudes to the nature of musicality and how these affect practice in the classroom. It contributes to studies for a PhD and, while still in the comparatively early stages, has developed into a consideration of teacher identity, the nature of what it is to be musical and the competencies related to the development of musicianship, and differing approaches to fostering musicianship in young people.

This early part of the study has consisted of:

- some preliminary reading around teacher identity and musicality
- conversations and activities undertaken by student teachers as part of their PGCE programme
- the development of a 'model' of music teacher identity
- some 'pilot' research activity into music teacher background and the competencies related to developing musicianship.

### Context

Ofsted (2009) has criticised today's music teachers for a lack of understanding of the nature of musical progress and for conducting weak assessment of pupil attainment. One is led to question whether this lack of understanding might spring out of the more creative, sound-based music curriculum now advocated in schools and pioneered in the 1960s by educationalists such as John Paynter in his seminal work, *Sound and silence* (Paynter & Aston 1968). It should be noted that not all educationalists (e.g. Sir Peter Maxwell Davies) have supported the increased 'informality' of the curriculum, commenting that expectations of pupil achievement have been lowered, or at least become less rigorous, as a result (Ward 2007).

Teachers themselves will have come to their vocation via a range of routes. In a small-scale survey carried out with student teachers in September 2009 [ $n=19$ ] by the author of this paper (their university tutor), respondents, at the start and as part of their training programme, were classified by the 'type' of their first degree:

1. Traditional: western classical music and theory focus
2. Applied: music technology and industry focus
3. Performance: practical performance focus, such as instrumental/vocal or performing arts
4. Cultural: such as world music focus, folk, popular music, etc.

The students were presented with the written statement, 'music lessons are designed to engage and interest most children but do not develop "real musicians"'. They were then invited to respond to the statement by indicating whether they strongly agree, mostly agree, have no opinion or disagree. The resulting data may be summarised thus:

*Traditional:* 71% strongly or mostly agree; 14% have no opinion; 14% disagree

*Applied:* 38% strongly or mostly agree; 13% have no opinion; 50% disagree

*Performance:* 33% strongly or mostly agree; 0% have no opinion; 67% disagree

An examination of these data might suggest that those from a more 'traditional' musical background and education have a more 'traditional' sense of what makes a 'musician'. In attempting to probe these views further, the students were asked to provide written responses to a further question: 'Try to define what, in your view, it means to be a musician. As part of your definition, you might consider how advanced in music a learner has to get before s/he can be said to be a musician.' Two of the subsequent responses can, perhaps, offer some additional insight into the possible relationship between biography and views of musicianship: Student A, from a traditional, western classical music background, based on progressing through instrumental performance grades, GCSE and A-level music, comments:

*'I consider anyone who can arrange, compose, perform and actively does so, to a level above Grade 5, give or take a few grades, [to be a musician]...'*

Student B, from a non-western background and whose first degree was not in music (Media Studies), comments:

*'I feel that a person who is interested in music and one who practises even at a basic level is a musician.'*

Observations such as these lead one to consider, perhaps, whether what Ofsted (2009) highlighted in its report referred to above is less about an understanding of musical progression and assessment strategies, and more about an understanding of musicality and what it takes to be musical; and that these differences will possibly spring from the teachers' own educational and musical background.

Extensive experience of leading a PGCE secondary music programme suggests that graduate pre-service teachers do not come empty to the task. They arrive with particular experiences, dispositions, understandings, prejudices, biases about the world of music and music education and, in particular, about what they believe the role of the music teacher to be and what counts as a music curriculum. These observations have led to the author's current research, which questions to what extent the biographies of secondary music teachers shape their understanding of the musicality of young people.

### **The biographies of secondary music teachers**

The vast majority of pupils within English state secondary schools are centred, in their musical interests and experiences, on the world of contemporary popular music (Macdonald et al. 2002), yet many secondary music teachers have a background music education in the western classical tradition (Hargreaves et al. 2003). There can sometimes be an issue of 'communication' of expectations in school music which arises from this, for, as Macdonald et al. (2002: 8) suggest in this example: 'an accomplished musician with classical western training may be disturbed to be asked to improvise in informal situations... equally, someone whose ideal self is built on their ability to improvise may feel embarrassed about their ignorance of musical theory, or the inability to read a score'.

So, musical preferences and education may affect a teacher's ability, skill and expectations

in the classroom but so might the teacher's temperament. Kemp (1996) in his exploration of the musical temperament draws distinctions between that of a musician and that of a music teacher. He suggests that 'while extraverts appear to make effective music teachers, they may not be the most receptive music learners' and that, paradoxically, 'temperamentally, it is by no means the case that high musical achievers necessarily make the best teachers' (Kemp 1996: 228). In addition, Kemp talks of the 'tug-of-war' which music teachers may have in their minds as they seek to reconcile their loyalty towards their own musicianship and the more realistic, day-to-day approach to music required in the classroom' (Kemp 1996: 229).

At all times, it seems, the biography – personal and musical – of the teacher will impinge on their practice in the classroom. This may seem rather obvious, but this current research project seeks to explore how far this can impact on the musical education of the pupils they teach and the expectations they have on how far the pupils can become truly musical (and what the teachers believe to be musical).

The hypothesis of this current research study suggests that a music teacher who, for example, has a largely western classical music education and background may view the musicality of their pupils differently to one who has a background in popular music culture. The former may expect to teach a curriculum characterised by instrumental and vocal performance, interpreting traditional staff notation and developing a knowledge and understanding of the canon of the musical works from the major western composers. This will also affect the way this teacher 'judges' the musical outcomes produced by the pupils. By contrast, the latter may focus a curriculum on performing by ear, improvisation and composition, with an emphasis on the creation rather than re-creation of music and covering the musical theory as it becomes relevant and necessary to complete these tasks. This, again, may also affect how musical outcomes will be judged and assessed. Thus, what is musical to one teacher may not be regarded as such by the other. This

is reflected, perhaps, in the trainee teacher quotations cited earlier (students A and B).

## Identity

The *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Soanes & Stevenson 2003) defines identity as the characteristics determining who a person is. Our entire biography – the events and people that have shaped our lives, our dispositions and beliefs, the actions we have taken – contributes to the forming of our identity: the image we have of ourselves. Music teachers – any teacher; or, indeed, anyone – will be a product of their background. A developing model of music teacher identity is beginning to take shape as part of the current research study, which explores the interaction between self-identity and musical identity and teacher identity. These interact to complement and, at times, to conflict with each other. The model as it currently stands can be seen at Figure 1.

Woods (1984) suggests that self-identity and self-image are developed from both the macro influences of social class, religion, political and economic climate, and the micro influences of family, teachers, friends, role models and personal events (Woods 1984: 246–56). This, it is argued, develops and changes as 'life events' and personal interactions touch upon us: building up, knocking down, developing views and philosophies, forming and breaking relationships, etc.

Musical identity and our sense of our developing musicianship can also be influenced by role models, family and friends but can also develop as a result of education and training in music, and the teachers we work with. The quality of the learning experience and what is achieved will be a product of three aspects (Entwistle 2007 in Welch 2008: 4–8):

- the student's background, ability, conceptions, knowledge and aspirations
- the approaches to learning and studying
- the perceptions of the teacher-learning environment
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The Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) report (Welch et al, 2008) found that classical musicians, for example, 'tended to have begun to engage with music at an earlier age and were influenced by parents, instrumental or vocal teachers and formal groups', while other-than-classical musicians 'tended to be slightly older in their formative encounters and reported that, typically, they were most influenced by well-known performers and informal groups'. It would seem, therefore, that differing musical education and biography may well impact upon the music we engage with and the style in which we learn our craft.

Music teacher identity may develop initially from the interaction of self and musicianship but may, over time, develop a 'shape' of its own. This will be formed, in the first instance, by Initial Teacher Education (ITE) tutors and studies together with placement mentors and policies. Later, it will continue to be formed by continuing professional development, the 'pressures and constraints of the job' (such as classroom behaviour management and paperwork), external policy-making at Government and local authority level and parental and pupil expectations. Some important conflicts can arise in the development of this identity:

- Analysis of training teachers in the classroom has demonstrated that models set by ITE tutors can contradict those set by placement mentors, and, as 'guests' in placement schools, the trainees will tend to err towards the latter rather than the former.
- As outlined above, Kemp (1996) suggests a tug-of-war between one's identity as a musician and the practicalities of developing musicality in children: 'this may well involve letting go of some cherished beliefs and deeply seated attitudes' (Kemp 1996: 229).
- Eddy (1969) has highlighted the gulf that can exist where school environments are vastly different to those experienced when the teachers were pupils (in Knowles 1992: 103).
- There may also be tensions that arise when personal educational philosophy contradicts external demands (from Government education policy, for example) (Jones & Moore 1995; Bernstein, 2000: 53 in Beck & Young 2005: 193).

The three identities of the music teacher, suggested in the model (Figure 1), have both separate and interleaved existences; each interacting with the other but also each having distinct and recognisable features.

### The next stage/methodology

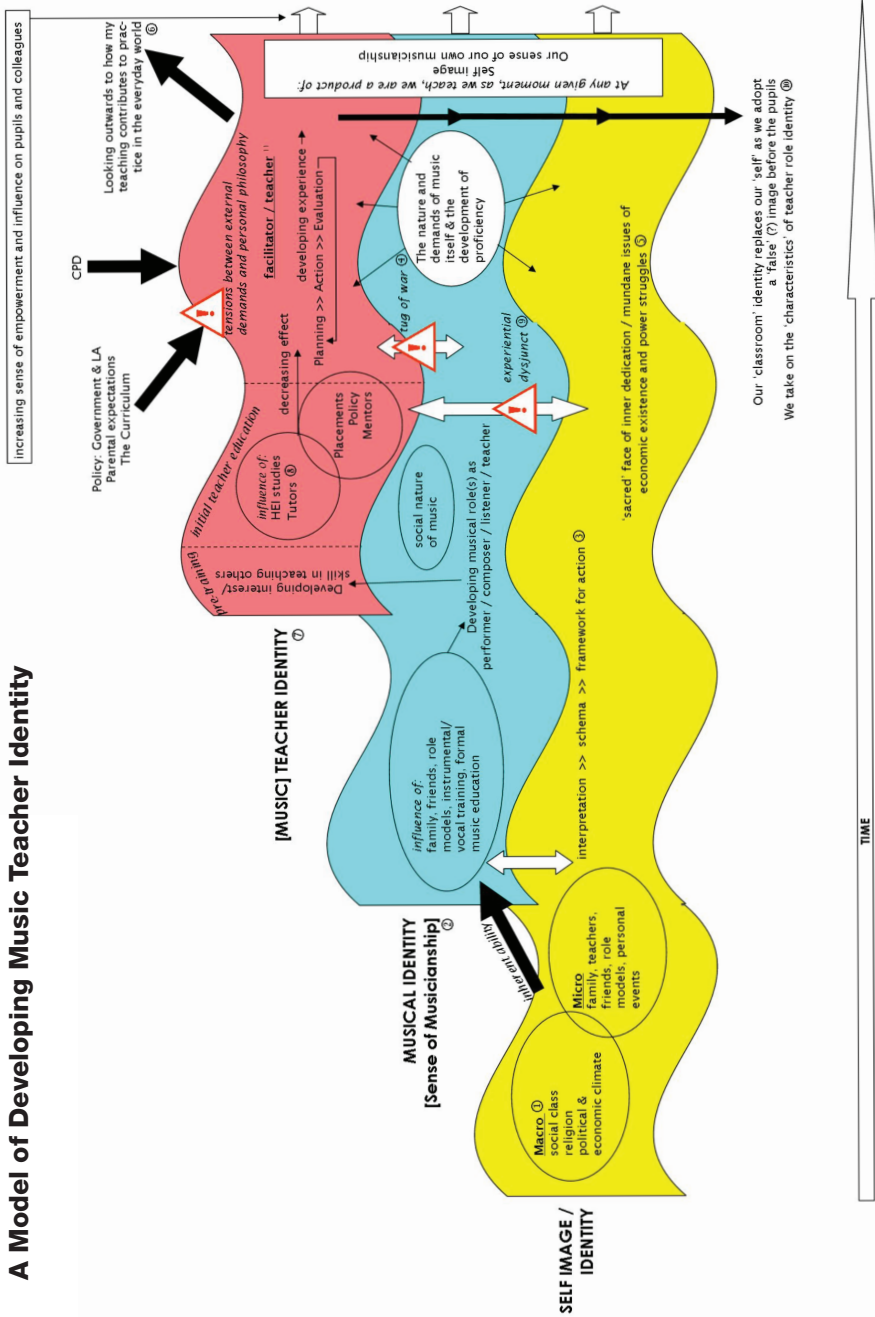
The current research project will principally focus on a limited number of in-depth case studies which will involve secondary music teacher trainees, newly qualified music teachers, serving and experienced music teachers and, for comparative purposes, students studying at conservatoires who intend to be professional musicians. The case studies will involve interviews, perusal of music department documentation and policies and observation of teaching. Through these means, the project will seek to explore biography and experience, beliefs and attitudes to music education and the nature of musicianship, and how this all shows itself in the music curriculum offered to young people in secondary schools.

Underpinning these case studies and informing many of the focal points for investigation will be a larger sample of questionnaires and online activities aiming to establish potential links between biography, belief and practice. A sample of the participants in these activities will also be interviewed with the aim of establishing a rationale for the responses made.

The research starts from a set of ontological standpoints including:

- that music teachers are a product of their education and background;
- that their views of what it is to be musical, and how those views affect practice, are formed by their biography;
- that potential conflict can occur between the ideology of what it is to be musical and the practicalities of the classroom; and
- that personal identity as a musician can be transformed by the developing teacher identity.

# A Model of Developing Music Teacher Identity



The circled numbers are literature citations (see References section for key).

If it is found that music teacher biography indeed influences to any extent how the teachers design curricula, devise musical activities for the young people under their tutorage, and judge the musicality of the outcomes and the musicianship of the pupils, the implications may be significant. These will affect the content of the curriculum and differences in the way musical progression and attainment are judged. The way in which teachers interpret assessment criteria (such as the National Curriculum Attainment Target Level Descriptors) and how they come to decisions on what young people should learn/study in music will be different from teacher to teacher and the National Curriculum may require revision. There may be inconsistency and unreliability and it will be a challenge for teachers to rise to the difficulties highlighted by Ofsted (2009): that teachers lack understanding of what it takes to make musical progress and that they make weak assessments. The outcome of the completed research and the PhD may need to include possible strategies for developing some agreed understanding in these areas among music educationalists.

## References

Literature citations in Figure 1  
(for full references see below):

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2. Welch (2008)
3. Knowles (1992: 142)
4. Kemp (1996: 229)
5. Bernstein (2000) in Beck & Young (2005: 186)
6. Beck & Young (2005: 187)
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