Mentoring in EC-12 Music Education

Robert M. Maninger, Ed.D.
Associate Professor
Sam Houston State University
College of Education, Curriculum and Instruction
Huntsville, Texas 73341
rmm023@shsu.edu
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Abstract

Mentoring is a vital part of professional life in virtually every profession. However, very little academic research has been devoted to studying mentoring practices for music teachers, highlighting a need for further research and discussion on the topic. The author will explore the issue of mentorships among music teachers from his perspective as a college professor of education and former public school principal and upper level administrator.

Introduction

A variety of familiar mentoring formats, including residencies, clerkships, and apprenticeships represent deeply embedded mentoring processes associated with careers in medicine, law, and construction. Patients, clients, and customers find comfort and reassurance in the knowledge that they are dealing with a practitioner who has been thoroughly trained and vetted by specialists in the given field. In addition, many mentoring opportunities are available to us as we live our daily lives. For example, a novice gardener could seek the counsel of older, more successful gardeners to learn what it takes to grow the perfect tomatoes. In my own experience, the mentoring from seasoned gardeners, along with years of practice and a little luck has made me prosper into someone who has a green thumb, or so everyone thinks. I do not have a green thumb, but I have had accomplished mentors.

Although I do not consider myself to be particularly talented in the field of music, I enjoy a variety of styles and genres of music, and I understand the mentoring process. The main thing that I know about the mentoring process in the field of education is that it is cumbersome, at best.

Mentoring in Music Education
Official mentoring practices in the world of education are often difficult to administer. Some of the issues to address include how the mentors should be selected, how they will be trained, how the training will be funded, and how assessments can be used to determine if the mentoring program is actually making a difference. Any one of these important considerations can ultimately impact the success or failure of a mentoring program.

The first years of any educator’s career are trying and frustrating. Many first year teachers find themselves unprepared for the mental and physical grind of this most noble of professions, and this can be especially true for our music educators. Although academic research involving music teachers’ mentoring practices is limited, the available literature reveals that many mentoring programs beneficial for general classroom teachers are simply not available for new music educators (Benson, 2008). Most first-year music educators find themselves exhausted, overwhelmed, and frustrated at the end of the day, with little guidance as to what can be done to remedy the situation. The Higher Education Arts Data Services reported in 2004 that 11,000 music educators leave the profession each year, and the number of newly certified music educators entering the profession per year is only around 6,000 (Jacobs, 2008). That leaves a national gap of nearly 5,000 vacated music educator positions each year. Appropriate mentoring practices could significantly improve the quality of teaching experiences among discouraged music teachers. Ingersoll (2003) found that first-year teachers without mentors were 40% more likely to leave the teaching profession than those who worked with a mentor. Further, Ingersoll reported that first year teachers who worked with an experienced mentor in the same subject area and shared a planning period with the mentor had a departure rate of less than 18%. The value of same-field mentoring was also supported by the research of Haack (2006). The occupational stress and the isolationism associated with being a music educator is likely responsible for high
rates of attrition for music educators (Benson, 2008; Roulston, Legette, & Womack, 2005). The first line of defense for this situation would be to mentor new music educators.

There seems to be a lack of consistent standards and emotional support, including attention to the unique dynamics, and feelings of isolationism of music educators (Benson, 2008). In my experience, none of these conditions create a barrier to the mentoring process for music teachers; but we must specifically address their unique circumstances. The typical structure in most school districts can facilitate natural mentoring opportunities, but the size of the school district may influence the appropriate nature and scope of support.

The establishment of consistent standards for new teacher mentorships appears to be, at a minimum, a state-level decision-making opportunity. State organizations for music educators must give serious consideration to standards for the mentoring process, availability of the program to all new music educators, and the funding to make it all possible. These standards must encourage mentors to provide guidance on matters ranging from the more mundane, daily issues to the more scholarly aspects of instruction. In other words, mentors can help new music educators learn where to park, where to find the copy machine, and whether a teacher’s lounge exists; however, effective mentoring standards should also encourage continued musical growth as well as specific emotional, physical, and mental needs of the first year music educator.

As a rule, the music classroom is unique to each school (Benson, 2008). By design, there are logistical differences between the music classroom and the standard classroom, and the classroom setups often need to change for each group of students who meet there. The constant flux of a music classroom illustrates the importance of having mentors from the same field. to understand the context in order to truly help and encourage new music educators.
Isolationism among educators, a situation that has existed for decades in this country, is common throughout education. The problem for music educators is that they can be isolated from other teachers in their building or school district by the nature of their subject matter as well as by the physical location of their classrooms. Because music education is different from almost all other content taught in our schools, isolationism of our new music educators can only be overcome by pairing them with mentors who are also music educators.

One of the challenges for music educators to overcome in the implementation process of a mentoring program is “fit” (Benson, 2008). Even if or when state-level agencies set mentoring practice guidelines for music educators, there is no guarantee that those standards will be applied universally across all school districts because some state-level standards may not apply specifically to local school campuses.

The establishment of positive mentoring relationships is often difficult and uncertain. New music educators must be provided with certain knowledge, skills, and support in learning to manage the pressures, stress, isolationism, and other unknowns they face, (Benson, 2008). Since there is never a guarantee that the relationship between the mentor and the new music educator will be strong enough to cover every one of these issues, it often becomes incumbent upon new music educators to be resourceful enough to overcome some of these challenges on their own. However, a good mentor can be a golden resource in times of crisis!

Implications for Administrators

As a former elementary principal and high school principal, I believe that responsibility for establishing mentorships ultimately lies with the administrator at the campus level. How and where mentoring guidance begins is determined by the size of the campus and school district. For example, if the administrator at a large school hires a new music educator, that teacher would
likely be joining a team of more experienced music educators circulating through the building on any given day. The larger school districts often hire elementary music teachers as part of a team of three or four music educators who circulate through both elementary and secondary schools. On the other hand, the administrator of a small school could face more challenging obstacles when hiring and placing a new music educator. Perhaps the small school administrator could consult with talented music educators in neighboring school districts as potential mentors. Alternatively, a consortium of music educators could possibly be formed among several neighboring campuses. For example, I served an administrator for a rural 1A school district, and there were four neighboring campuses within a 20-mile radius. Principals, superintendents, and other administrators must think outside the box in order to develop appropriate mentoring programs in specialized fields such as music education. Sometimes, we can find the resources that we need by simply investing a little time with each other. It might mean that an administrator should get to know seasoned music educators in order to make wise choices determining the correct fit for a mentor/mentee selection. Administrators will need to think creatively about release time, travel time, class time, and down time for both mentors and mentees. A critical element to properly serve new music educators is time.

**Conclusion**

Tomato growers do not become successful without a considerable commitment to time. A great deal of time in the garden must be devoted to tilling, preparing, planting, nurturing, watering, and harvesting. However, another substantial amount of time must be invested in the mentoring process in order to learn the proper methods from older, seasoned veteran gardeners. The time requirement for teaching and emotional support must be honored by both the mentor and the new grower. The same can be said for new music educators and their mentors.
Developing successful mentoring programs is contingent on the support from creative, invested administrators who are understand the importance of time for connection and support to develop in mentor relationships. Principals must see beyond the daily schedule of classes and make time available for the new music educator to seek out the support of a trusted mentor. To that end, I urge administrators to consider that the time sacrificed from a daily schedule to accomplish these goals will be far less than the time investment involved in finding a replacement. More importantly, the new music educator who decides to move on could represent the loss of a potential star who might have become dedicated to our children for years to come. The underlying situational issues for mentoring in music education often can be addressed and managed in the normal practices of arranging and grouping of personnel within a district. There may still be obstacles to overcome, but creative thinking on the part of school leadership can lead to much smoother first years of teaching experience for music educators. At the very least, support systems should be in place to help them face the issues of being inexperienced. While experience is often recognized as the best teacher, time spent with a good mentor is the most wholesome and effective way to maintain the pool of talented music educators available to us each year.
References


