Effective Teaching in Secondary School Music: Developing Identities in Teachers and Pupils

Whilst the research literature on pupils is growing, there is virtually no research on the problems in British secondary school music from the teacher’s point of view. This ESRC-funded project takes up the challenge...

The Teacher Identities in Music Education (TIME) project is investigating how the attitudes and identities of intending secondary school music teachers develop during the transition from music student or musician through postgraduate teacher education and into their first teaching post. It is also exploring how students on undergraduate teacher education courses might differ from those in university music departments and specialist music colleges in their attitudes toward, and preparedness for, teaching secondary school music as a career.

Funded by the UK Government Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the project is hosted jointly by the University of Surrey Roehampton and the University of London Institute of Education. The grant will finish in July 2003 and we are currently seeking additional funding to extend the project.

TIME aims to discover whether some of the contemporary problems in British secondary school music education (such as teacher recruitment shortages and the pupil disinterest recently reported by the National Foundation for Education Research) can be explained in terms of conflicts of musical identity (see What Are Musical Identities?). These conflicts may include the teacher’s self-perception as performer or teacher, and the pupil’s implicit distinction between music inside and outside school.

The fundamental hypothesis is that the effectiveness of secondary school music teaching is dependent on the degree of congruence between the musical identities of teachers and pupils. To investigate this, TIME is looking at the early development of teachers’ careers and exploring the relationship with musical identity in pupils.

Who is involved in TIME?

The project is directed by Professor David Hargreaves (University of Surrey Roehampton) and Professor Graham Welch (University of London Institute of Education). Ross Purves is research officer whilst Dr Nigel Marshall is acting as research consultant. The team is grateful for the advice received from external consultants Dr Linda Hargreaves (University of Cambridge) and Dr Janet Mills (Royal College of Music). Participant institutions include University of Surrey Roehampton, University of London Institute of Education, University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, City University, the Royal College of Music, Manchester Metropolitan University, Birmingham Conservatoire and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

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What Are Musical Identities?

The concept of ‘musical identities’ provides the theoretical framework for this project. This new and exciting area of research is reviewed by Raymond MacDonald, David Hargreaves and Dorothy Miell (Musical Identities, Oxford University Press, 2002). According to the writers, music can be used to express aspects of personal identity such as gender identity, national identity and youth identity; but many individuals also construct identities within music, for instance, as a performer or teacher.

The main focus of the current project is upon how secondary music teachers construct their own identities as their careers develop. Many will have been educated within the Western classical tradition where music-making is seen as the domain of the professional performing musician. Might this give rise to conflicting identities, namely between ‘performing musician’ and ‘music teacher’? In addition, the data on pupil achievement and teaching effectiveness suggests that a Western classical background may leave intending secondary music teachers ill prepared for the demands of the modern British secondary school classroom. In particular, for those groups of pupils (such as certain ethnic minority males) for whom a particular genre of pop music is an essential ingredient of their perceived identity. The potential exists for mismatches between pupils’ ‘own music’ and ‘school music’. A complementary intention of the study is to devise measures of musical identity in pupils.
Research Design

The TIME project has two strands, a longitudinal questionnaire study employing quantitative analysis and individual case studies that will provide a rich source of contextual, qualitative data.

In the longitudinal questionnaire study, students from undergraduate and postgraduate music teacher education courses along with final-year undergraduate students from university music departments and music colleges are completing the Musical Careers Questionnaire (MCQ). This specially designed instrument gathers information on participants’ musical background, attitudes towards careers in music and music teaching and views on their own developing skills in these two professions. Before use, the MCQ was piloted and reviewed by fourteen experienced musicians, music teachers and education researchers.

Participants on one-year postgraduate teacher education (PGCE) courses completed the MCQ just before graduation in June 2002. A second version of the questionnaire, to be administered in spring 2003, will assess how professional experience of secondary school teaching might have affected their attitudes and development. Participants on a four-year undergraduate teacher education (BEd) course also completed the MCQ in June 2002, at the end of their third year. They will be asked to complete a second MCQ as they near graduation and contemplate their career options.

MCQ participants from university departments and music colleges who progress into postgraduate teacher education will also be asked to complete a second MCQ with a view to establishing how adequately they believe their previous studies prepared them for secondary teaching.

A subset of MCQ respondents currently in teaching posts or on teacher education placements will be asked to participate in the case studies strand of the project. Individual semi-structured interviews will be used examine aspects of identity, self-concept, and attitudes. These will allow specific areas of the MCQ to be explored in greater depth and will focus on the degree of congruence with pupils’ musical interests and attitudes. Contextual data, such detailed lesson plans, lesson observations, schemes of work, personal logs, and records of commentaries by mentors will supplement these interviews.

The case studies will also provide an opportunity to work closely with the participants in developing classroom-based materials for music listening which will be used to explore aspects of pupils’ musical identities.

Some Preliminary Findings

The combined sample of postgraduate intending teachers (PGCE students) represents 17.25% of the total population of secondary music teachers that qualified in July 2002. The undergraduate teacher education (BEd) sample represents around 50% of the total BEd music population. Trends that have emerged from the data collected so far include:

- Students on postgraduate teacher education (PGCE) courses report that their musical careers were heavily influenced by their own secondary school teachers. Undergraduate teacher education (BEd) students rate both primary and secondary teachers as having been highly influential.

- Many PGCE students expect to be promoted to heads of department after five years in profession. Others want to go part-time and diversify into instrumental teaching, performing or pursue further postgraduate study.
- Students in music departments and colleges who are not considering secondary teaching as a career frequently cite perceived pupil disinterest and poor behaviour as reasons. Others feel that without piano skills they are ill equipped for the role.
- Participants on PGCE courses feel that peers expect them to be able to play the piano to a reasonable standard. Whilst they are expected to be interested in all musical styles, they do not feel compelled to attend classical or pop concerts frequently.

News Roundup

- The project has been received enthusiastically by musicians, teachers and education researchers. Invitations to speak about TIME have been received from a wide range of organisations including the UK Music Education Council, the Incorporated Society of Musicians, the University of London Institute of Education and the University of Cambridge.
- An email-based discussion forum has been established to help disseminate the findings of the project and to encourage debate on the issues raised. If you would like to join, please send an email to cirme@roehampton.ac.uk.
- Ross Purves and Nigel Marshall will present the latest TIME news including preliminary findings at a seminar at University of Surrey Roehampton on 3 December 2002 at 12:30. All are welcome in room 246 of Southlands College.