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**Documenting praxis shock in early-career Australian music teachers: the impact of pre-service teacher education<sup>i</sup>**

**Abstract**

*Early-career music teachers are well placed to comment on the effectiveness of pre-service teacher education. Their perceptions are particularly relevant in determining why music teachers are 'burning out' at an early stage of their career. This paper explores 15 early-career Australian music teachers' perceptions of their job, and their perceived preparedness for the workforce. Their stories suggest that although they feel a 'passion' towards teaching music, they see their early experiences in secondary schools as a time where they will either 'sink or swim', and where they see themselves as a 'one-man-band'. Analysis suggests that praxis shock in early-career music teachers is directly related to the unique experiences of being a music teacher. The paper concludes with recommendations for pre-service courses to address issues of praxis shock in early-career music teachers.*

**Key words**

early-career music teachers, praxis shock, pre-service preparation, professional isolation, teacher education

## Introduction

Early experiences as a teacher are crucial in determining beginning teachers' attitudes towards teaching, their understanding of the job, their professional behaviour, their classroom practice and their longevity in the profession (Flores, 2001; Ghaith & Shaaban, 1999; Gratch, 2001; Hawkey, 1996; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). These early experiences combine with personal beliefs and prior experiences to form the professional identity of a teacher, which informs teachers' future practices (Hawkey, 1996).

In many cases, the reality that these teachers are faced with differs from their expectations of teaching and causes teachers to re-evaluate their preconceived notions about teaching (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). The discrepancies between teachers' expectations of school life and the realities of teaching often contribute to what is known as *praxischock* (Mark, 1998) and is also referred to as praxis shock (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) or practice shock (Stokking, Leenders, De Jong, & Van Tartwijk, 2003). When teachers' expectations of teaching life are 'shattered' as beginning teachers, they tend to focus on survival rather than on learning how to teach more effectively (Wideen et al., 1998) and in many cases, the school environment becomes more powerful than pre-service education in determining teacher practice (Lampert & Ball, 1999; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000; Su, 1992).

Teacher education plays a key role in helping teachers develop a *realistic* understanding of the realities of teaching life (Gratch, 2001; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). If teacher education preparation has not been effective in preparing teachers, teachers may reject the knowledge and skills that they learned at university and unthinkingly adopt the teaching culture at their school.

Although praxis shock is likely to occur in teachers of all discipline areas, it is important to explore experiences of teachers within particular discipline areas as they tend to view themselves as discipline or age-level specialists (Martinez, 1994; Ramsey, 2000; Shulman &

Sparks, 1992). Within music teacher education, research has explored how pre-service music teachers learn to be teachers (Yourn, 2000), perceived problems of beginning music teachers (DeLorenzo, 1992; Krueger, 2000; Richards & Killen, 1993), role stress of experienced instrumental and choral music teachers (Scheib, 2003), teachers' perceptions of their induction experiences (DeLorenzo, 1992; Conway 2002), the effectiveness of pre-service courses in preparing primary and instrumental teachers to teach music (Conway, 2002; Temmerman, 1997), the competencies required by beginning music teachers (Leong, 1996), and early-career classroom music teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their course in light of their pre-service teacher education (Ballantyne, 2006). Studies by both Leong (1996) and Kelly (1999) suggest that 'burnout' is a feature of early-career music teachers' lives in Australia, and Queensland specifically. However, no research has specifically documented the areas where this occurs. This paper fills the gap in the literature, by providing evidence of the areas where music teachers are experiencing praxis shock in Queensland, Australia, and highlighting where teacher preparation needs to address early-career<sup>ii</sup> music teachers' perceived needs.

### **Context for the research**

This study involved early-career secondary music teachers in Queensland, Australia who had graduated from one of three pre-service education programs. All accredited teacher education programs in Queensland have to comply with the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration's (1999) guidelines regarding philosophies, goals, structure and content of programs, teaching and learning approaches, and assessment of student work. As a result, pre-service teacher education programs at all Queensland universities are quite similar.

## Method

As part of a larger study exploring the effectiveness of music teacher education programs in Queensland, fifteen early-career music teachers were interviewed regarding their experiences as beginning music teachers. Based on their responses to a questionnaire (the results of which are not the focus of this paper), participants were selected to represent varied teaching experiences and perceptions on the effectiveness of the course. Briefly, the interviewees comprised 11 females and 4 males, the majority of whom were either somewhat satisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with their pre-service course (were they being chosen because of this distinction?) and three who were very satisfied with their pre-service course. They were a mixture of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year teachers from a variety of schools including both metropolitan and rural schools in private and public schooling systems.

The interview utilized semi-structured questioning, which meant that all interviewees were asked identical questions, but additional questions were also used to elaborate, probe and expand on particular topics where necessary. This flexibility ensured that important and salient topics were not excluded from the interview, and also provided enough structure to ensure comparability of responses. The interview questions relevant to this paper were:

1. How would you describe the job of a secondary classroom music teacher to someone who is completely unfamiliar with what music teachers do?
2. What impact has your university teacher education course had on your experiences in your first few years at school?
3. What experiences have you had that you were not well prepared for?

Interviews took place across a wide variety of sites – most commonly at the school of the teacher (if in Metropolitan Brisbane), or by telephone interview (if the interviewee lived

outside Metropolitan Brisbane). All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed with participants' consent.

Interview data were subjected to content analysis to identify themes, concepts and meaning. Content analysis is a method commonly used to identify themes, concepts and meaning emerging from participants' discussions in interviews (Burns, 2000). Analysis in the current study involved:

- Reading transcripts and noting and coding themes as they emerged. Themes were continually compared with one another to ensure internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (themes held together meaningfully, and differences between the themes were clear) (Cavana, Delahaye, & Sekaran, 2001). Adjustments were made as necessary throughout the process of content analysis.
- Examining transcripts to see how categories interrelated and clustered together. Sub themes and new themes emerged at this stage.
- Re-examining categories for similar content, and ensuring that excluded content was not relevant. Changes were made to category labels if necessary.
- Examining and mapping relationships across categories in order to create a greater understanding of the research area.
- Frequently revisited themes and raw data were to check, question or support various arguments as the report was written

The content analysis used in this study used coding for manifest content (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001). Manifest content is that which is directly said in the interviews, whereas latent content is that which is implied. Pseudonyms were used in the reporting of data and the quotes presented are representative of the majority of interviewees' responses, unless otherwise stated.

## Results and discussion

Participants' responses to the interview questions revealed that praxis shock was a common experience for early-career teachers in this study. Their responses provide insight into the factors underlying praxis shock and steps that might be taken to address it.

### *The experience of praxis shock*

When asked to comment on the impact of their pre-service programs, most early-career music teachers indicated that they felt ill-prepared for the realities of teaching, reporting that "I just learnt on the job" (Claire), "I was not well prepared" (Susan, Joy, Grant, Carolyn, Jessica, Roy, Fiona, Claire) and "I honestly had no idea what's going on" (Lotte). Participants used these phrases, together with more direct statements such as "it was a shock" (Roy, Jessica), to refer to praxis shock in different areas of their early experiences. Although praxis shock is well documented among teachers of all discipline areas, music teachers tend to link the 'shock' that they experienced to the specific nature of *music teaching*.

Roy                      *Well because we weren't prepared for any of that at university, it was a shock when I got out, and I was working much harder than I thought that I would have to. And in my first couple of weeks as a teacher I went up to the principal and I said: "this is ridiculous! I'm doing as many classes as everybody else, and I'm taking the choir and the band and all of that, and I'm a first year teacher, and it is just ridiculous," because it was such a shock to me that all of this stuff fell to you, and it didn't fall to anyone else.*

As previously indicated, praxis shock occurs where there are discrepancies between teachers' expectations of school life and the realities of teaching. It is important therefore to determine

where these perceived discrepancies exist in order to understand the factors underlying the experience of praxis shock.

#### *Factors underlying praxis shock*

To better understand the context of early-career music teachers, interviewees were asked to describe the job of a secondary classroom music teacher as if to someone who was completely unfamiliar with classroom music teaching in Queensland. Analysis of the participants' responses identified two factors underlying the experience of praxis shock:

- physical and professional isolation within the school; and
- high workload and multiple responsibilities associated with the extra-curricular music program.

As a result of these factors, early-career music teachers in the current study saw their early experiences in schools as a time where they were left to '*sink or swim*', and where they saw themselves as a '*one-man-band*'.<sup>iii</sup> These perceptions are explored in the following section, along with a discussion of implications for pre-service teacher education.

#### *'Sink or swim': the problem of professional isolation*

A number of participants felt that they had been left to 'sink or swim' in their early years of teaching. In other words, they had been left to fend for themselves with little support from other music teachers or mentors in their own profession. This occurrence was particularly noticeable with early-career music teachers, due to the nature of the subject area. Most schools have few music classes and employ limited numbers of music teachers. As a result, many early-career music teachers felt that despite their pre-service preparation, they were thrown into an unfamiliar environment, where they had to figure out on their own how to survive.

*Antoinette        I certainly was thrown into the deep end and had to learn to swim ... So that was hard – coming in as the only music teacher, and to coordinate as well. I was thrown in in the deep end.*

Comments such as these are consistent with the findings of Rolley (2001) who argues that early-career teachers are frequently being told to ‘forget all you’ve learnt at uni’, which results in teachers relying on “inner resources rather than systemic, supportive structures” to survive (Rolley, 2001, p. 40). Perceived isolation was viewed as contributing towards the praxis shock experienced by the early-career music teachers in this study. This is consistent with findings reported by McCormack and Thomas that “beginning teachers who perceived themselves as isolated, either through location or lack of support from school personnel ... appeared more concerned about ‘survival’ issues” (2003, p. 135).

The physical isolation of music teachers in schools (the music department is often physically separated due to the amount of ‘noise’ created) as well as from other music teachers (many music departments consist of only one music teacher) exacerbates the difficulties faced by early-career music teachers. Isolation often results in teachers feeling ‘traumatised’, which affects their professional development and has also been linked to music teacher dropout (Kelly, 1999; Krueger, 1999; Krueger, 2000). These research findings were supported by the current study. An example of this is seen in Jessica’s comments about expecting less isolation and more professional support in her first few years at school:

*Jessica        I was the only music teacher, my head of department has no idea about music, got sick during my first year and wasn’t here, so I just had nobody, nothing ... I think it was sort of flying by the seat of my pants, getting into the classroom and keeping the kids organised, but I don’t think I was giving the kids any quality knowledge, or understanding, and that same first year we did the musical, which made it even worse ... I couldn’t even remember where I was meant to be, let alone trying to teach the kids something exciting and wonderful, it just didn’t happen.*



The experience of professional isolation probably occurs among early-career teachers of all disciplines and has also been documented in the UK among music teachers in general (Spruce, 2002). However, from the analysis of these interviews, it seems that *early-career* music teachers may be experiencing this isolation in a more acute way, due to the unique demands of teaching music, and the fact that they do not feel adequately prepared for this by their pre-service education. This experience of professional isolation appears to be a major factor leading to praxis shock.

*The 'one man band': the problem of high workloads and multiple responsibilities*

Many of the early-career teachers in this study felt that they had high workloads and were expected to perform multiple roles, beyond that of other classroom teachers. For example, they not only taught their share of classes, but also were expected to coordinate and promote the extra-curricular music program. The perception of a music teacher being a 'one-man-band' was suggested by one of the early-career teachers (Carolyn) and was supported by the comments of most respondents. It is a useful way to view early-career music teachers' perceptions of their profession and the multiple responsibilities that music teachers have – within the classroom, as coordinator of the extra-curricular program, and as a promoter of the music programs and the school. Such multiple responsibilities tend to fall to early-career music teachers because they are often the only music teacher in the school.

Interviewees associated the notion of a 'one-man-band' with the incidence of 'burnout'.<sup>iv</sup> They mentioned that it is considered 'normal' for a music teacher to 'burnout' after about 4-5 years if they have been doing their job 'properly' or 'well'. 'Burnout' was perceived to be specific to the distinctive nature of their job, particularly if teachers tried to accomplish everything that was expected of them to a high standard. Carolyn candidly explains how being a 'one man band' resulted in her feeling 'burnt-out'.

*Carolyn            To be good at your job, especially as a music teacher ... you have to work your absolute butt off ... you're a one-man-band often as a music teacher, and so to be the one-man-band is hard work, you don't get breaks, you don't get spares. They don't exist. And so ... I was burnt out, and I still am ... music teaching specifically is like that ... burnout, I think, it happens to everyone who is doing their job well.*

The idea that workload expectations are higher for music teachers than for teachers of other subject areas came through strongly in the interviews, in particular “because the expectations are very high and the workload is very high too” (Grant). This high workload stems from the expectations (from school administration and the community) that classroom music teachers will be involved in all musical activities at the school, not only in the classroom, regardless of whether they have developed skills in those areas:

*Janis                I guess ultimately you're expected to be a 'jack of all trades' when you become a music teacher, you're the person who's got to work the sound, who's got to work amplifiers and things like that. And if you're not trained in that area, like I wasn't, I've just sort of learned it as I've gone along. I would have had a lot more confidence going into teaching if I had that experience already.*

All of the interview respondents reported being heavily involved with the instrumental and extra-curricular music program.<sup>v</sup> Research has shown that the extra-curricular music program is more valued by the school than the classroom music program (Lierse, 1999), yet an earlier study indicated that this area was perceived by early-career teachers to be the one area in which they were least well prepared (Ballantyne & Packer, 2004). Interview

responses confirmed that early-career music teachers considered their involvement in extra-curricular programs as a major factor underlying praxis shock.

*Fiona                Everything that is required is done outside classroom time. A lot of it is not timetabled into class and is expected for us to do it, however, we are not paid extra for it and it is a core element of our teaching program, so it is done at lunchtime, before school, after school, weekends, night time concerts ... it's huge.*

Although the concern about not 'being paid' for this extra work was raised by many teachers, it was unclear as to whether increased pay would assuage this problem. Most teachers interviewed accepted their role in the extra-curricular program and saw it as part of the job. However, they felt unprepared for the time that the extra-curricular program demands.

*Carolyn:            Nobody tells you how much time it takes for you to do all these things ... They don't prepare you for that as a music teacher specifically.*

Although most early-career music teachers reported having extra-curricular music activities "thrust upon them" (Roy), one interviewee (Grant) noted that the extra-curricular program complemented his classroom program very well. Preparation for this responsibility, as well as the provision of adequate support for music teachers in the school are crucial if these expectations are to be met.

The concept of a 'one-man-band' was perceived to be a unique problem associated with the high workloads and multiple responsibilities placed upon early-career music teachers. Their role as coordinator of various extra-curricular programs and activities in their own time is seen as being integral to the job (yet not usually part of their teaching load). In addition, the school and community see this involvement as being the most important role of the music teacher and the need to perform in concerts in front of peers creates additional pressure.

Teachers reported that they did not feel prepared for this following their pre-service teacher education, resulting in feelings of 'shock'.

### **Implications for teacher education**

This paper has explored the reported experiences of early-career Australian music teachers in the secondary schools, and their perceived preparedness to deal with these experiences. These teachers described feelings of physical and professional isolation and difficulties dealing with the high workload and multiple responsibilities outside the music classroom. Expectations regarding their involvement in the extra-curricular music program seemed to cause particular problems for early-career music teachers. The areas where they felt most unprepared were perceived to be specific to the role of a music teacher. When describing these early experiences, interviewees continually repeated that these problems were a 'shock' to them following their pre-service preparation. In short, they did not feel that their pre-service education had prepared them adequately for these aspects of being a secondary classroom music teacher.

It should be noted that teachers interviewed in this study were not entirely negative about their pre-service preparation, or their experiences in the classroom. On the contrary, they reported a 'passion' for teaching music (Ballantyne, 2005), and felt that praxis shock could be addressed in both the university and school settings.

Within the university setting, interviewees spoke of the need for pre-service teacher education courses to prepare future teachers for the realities of the working environment (in this case as secondary classroom music teachers). Indeed, Stokking, Leenders, De Jong, and Van Tartwijk (2003) argue that "a thorough and realistic preparation of candidate teachers may reduce ... the intensity of the practice shock and the resulting dropout of prospective and novice teachers" (p. 331). Teacher education courses that are contextualised, integrated and continue to support teachers after they have graduated will be best situated to reduce praxis-shock in early-career music teachers (Ballantyne, in press). It is therefore argued that:

- An examination of the ‘realities’ of teaching will better equip pre-service teachers for their future contexts. By ensuring that pre-service teachers experience ‘real’ teaching situations throughout their studies (through, for example, integrated practicum opportunities, problem-based learning opportunities and interaction with a variety of music teachers in many different contexts), students will be able to critically reflect on and prepare for their future context.
- Teacher education should integrate music, education and professional knowledge and skills across all areas of the course. Integrated teacher education involves assisting pre-service teachers to see the links that exist between their general education and music courses and between theory and practice. This requires extensive planning within courses, across courses and between schools, the community, and universities. It is suggested that effective integration modelled in teacher education would translate to the adoption of effective integration practices by future teachers.
- Although a pre-service course that prepares students for their future context (in a constructivist and reflective way) should minimise the incidence of praxis shock, an appropriate continuation of this style of support once teachers enter the schools seems essential. Such continuing support should be designed to address the needs expressed by early-career Australian music teachers in this study, in particular the unique problems that these secondary school music teachers face (as argued above) and their need for discipline-specific induction and mentoring programs (as suggested by Conway, 2001; DeLorenzo, 1992; Krueger, 1999, 2000, 2001; Yourn, 2000).

While this study does not specifically address the issue of in-service music teacher education, it is clearly an area for further research. Similarly, some attention to the working conditions of music teachers in Queensland may be warranted. It would also be useful to explore the experiences of early-career primary music teachers, as it is not certain how their experiences in the first few years of teaching might be different to secondary teachers’ experiences. A study of itinerant music teachers (Roulston, 1998) indicated similarities to the present study, where teachers reported difficulties with heavy workloads and a sense of belonging. Although Roulston’s study did not focus on early-career teachers, it is possible that the

itinerancy of primary school music teachers might exacerbate the praxis shock of these teachers as they begin their careers. This has not been established by the current study, and is an area for future research.

This paper has documented the praxis shock evident in early-career secondary school music teachers in Australia. Although directly relevant to music teacher education, the findings of this study may also be of interest to other areas of teacher education where early-career teachers may experience physical and professional isolation, high workload, and multiple responsibilities over and above their classroom commitments. It is argued that pre-service and in-service teacher education programs be designed to minimise the incidence of praxis shock, particularly through providing contextualisation, ongoing professional development and mentoring. Such programs are most likely to meet the needs of early-career teachers.

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<sup>i</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Society of Music Education, Music in Schools and Teacher Education Commission in Hong Kong, July 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> For the purposes of this study, the term 'early-career teacher' refers to teachers in their first four years teaching.

<sup>iii</sup> The separation of these categories is helpful in the analysis of the data. It must, however, be stressed that these two categories are interconnected in many ways.



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<sup>iv</sup> ‘Burnout’ was also associated, to a lesser extent, with the notion of ‘sink or swim’.

<sup>v</sup> A third (32%) of all respondents to the questionnaire were employed as instrumental teachers (as well as classroom teachers).