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1 Going Inside the Music Classroom

The degree is completed and teacher certification requirements met: the new graduate in music education is ready to enter the classroom as teacher, rather than student/observer/student intern. What a major step! Going inside the classroom as the ‘main’ teacher is an exceedingly different experience than going in as observer or intern.

One is now expected to be able to:

1. Organize instruction
2. Manage a classroom
3. Communicate with all constituents (students, parents, district and building colleagues)

Furthermore, he or she should:

4. Understand the social and political realities of the profession
5. Comprehend content and skills to teach in an age-appropriate manner (quite a task at the elementary level, with the span of preschool to puberty entering the room)
6. Establish and maintain an environment that is conducive to learning
7. Develop a plan for continuing education and professional growth

No longer the student-in-training, the new graduate is now the *teacher*; in truth, however, the graduate’s learning has just begun. A degree in hand qualifies the person, but the

person is responsible for bringing quality to the profession. How does it start?

“Who Are You?”

As one enters the music class, knowing who he or she is as a person is vital. While complete self-knowledge is a life-long pursuit, understanding some basics about oneself—strengths, shortcomings, passions and beliefs—provides a foundation for success as a teacher.

Personality most definitely plays a role in being effective as an instructor. After all, one’s personality is the filter naturally employed when faced with choices and alternative actions. As a teacher within the music classroom, an educator will make multiple decisions, often within a split second. He or she may not have the luxury of time to consider all possible courses of action through any other lens but his or her own.

The ultimate goal, I believe, is for teachers to be honest and authentic, to be true to who they are as people. Good teachers indicate that when they try to be someone they’re not, the students see right through it; furthermore, they can’t maintain the energy it takes to imitate and act out a role. Teaching is an extension of who a person is in the ‘real’ world. Good teachers know how to be themselves and bring the best of themselves into the learning arena. Every successful classroom in the country became successful due to the adult personality in the room; nothing else compares.

Once the music classroom is entered, it’s all about the teacher and the students. Learning occurs as a result of the relationship the effective educator develops with students, as well as how he or she organizes what it is they will do. When I remember my best teachers, I’m certain they became favorites due to what they taught, how they taught, and the relationship we developed within the educational setting. These teachers were comfortable showing us who they were as people. I believe the combination of personality plus professional know-how is the essence of a good and memorable teacher.

Richard Traina, president of Clark University, shared three characteristics that describe a good teacher:

1. Competence in subject matter
2. Caring deeply about students and their success
3. Distinctive character¹

¹ James H. Stronge, *Qualities of Effective Teachers* (Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2002).

This “distinctive character” is the unique personality one brings into the classroom. Stronge indicated that as a person, an effective teacher makes a habit of:

1. Listening to, understanding, and knowing students
2. Establishing a fair and respectful environment
3. Promoting enthusiasm and motivation for learning²

I’ve observed that most successful music teachers are generally quite passionate about their subject matter. How can one teach something from the depth of his soul unless genuinely enthused about it? (I’ve experienced teachers who didn’t care much for their own subject matter; it’s not easy to learn in that kind of setting.) The magic of teaching occurs when we see a transformation in our students as they progress in their genuine love for learning and for music. This can only occur when a teacher’s distinctive character is blended with a rich learning environment.

Questions to Self

I think teachers should take the time to ask themselves certain questions to trigger self-awareness and professional perspective. The answers should help guide educational decisions teachers encounter throughout their career. Before going inside the music classroom, consider asking:

1. What do I believe about learners?
2. What is my fundamental reason for teaching music in a school/classroom setting?
3. What do I have to offer as a teacher and as a colleague?
4. What personal qualities and traits do I possess that will help me succeed? That will help my students succeed?
5. What do I believe a successful teacher looks like and sounds like?
6. What does joyful learning look like and sound like?
7. How do I want my students to describe me as a teacher and as a person?
8. What honor do I bring to the profession?
9. Am I ready to put my own musician ego aside and allow my students to be the ‘stars’?

² *Ibid.*