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“Staying on our feet”: A case study of an online community of novice music teachers

Poster presentation and abstract

Multiple forms of support for teachers new to the profession are important and necessary, yet often challenging. While mentoring and support for novice teachers in elementary and secondary education has been studied rather extensively, what effective support looks like for novice music teachers (NMTs) has not been studied as thoroughly. Some researchers have even gone so far as to say that current mentoring structures are simply not effective for novice music teachers because of the unique demands of a music teacher’s position (Conway, 2006; Jacobs, 2008). Further, the recent calls for “comprehensive induction” (Wood & Stanulis, 2009) suggest that mentoring alone is not sufficient support for initial educators. Scholars such as Beck and Kosnik (2006) and Moir (2005) recognize that peer interactions can be an important learning and support mechanism as teachers begin their careers; however, since many music teachers have no subject-specific peers in their building or district, such professional, content-specific conversations are often problematic.

These issues in effective support for novice music teachers may be addressed through virtual means. This research study attempted to ascertain any benefits for NMTs associated with participating in an online community of peers via a password-protected wikispace. Participants included eleven novice instrumental music teachers at the middle school and high school levels from four states. The teachers exchanged messages and information within the online community during the 2010-2011 school year; data sources included all transcripts from the online community and multiple interviews with each participant.

This research suggests that the online community appeared to have met the NMT’s emotional needs as they learned to become music teachers. The emotional support that came from interacting with others in similar situations was found to be an important contribution to the participants’ lives as NMTs. The practice of sharing thoughts, feelings and day-to-day occurrences in the virtual space helped the teachers cope with their questions and struggles by knowing they were not alone, giving them a forum to talk about unique needs and topics, and contributing to a sense of altruism and feeling helpful when they could assist a peer in a similar circumstance. While the majority of the participants also had in-person mentors, the online

community was seen as valuable because it offered multiple perspectives and anonymous peer support where there was not pressure to put on one's "best face". The online community worked to support the teachers in unique ways as compared to other induction strategies.

While the results indicate that the wikispace provided emotional support for the teachers, not many curricular ideas were exchanged. This seemed to occur primarily because of the participants' vastly different teaching assignments within the framework of instrumental music, and was also partially due to a lack of time to devote to the community as reported by the teachers. Findings from this research contribute to an understanding of the unique issues related to supporting NMTs and suggest that an online community could be a useful piece of their greater induction framework.

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