



Urban Music Education the Teachers' Perspective

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URBAN MUSIC EDUCATION

THE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

Richard K. Fiese and Nicholas J. DeCarbo look at responses from twenty urban music teachers about the unique teaching situations they face.

BY RICHARD K. FIESE AND NICHOLAS J. DECARBO

The subject of urban music education must be explored from various viewpoints in order to provide the clearest and most realistic vision of the state and future of music in our urban schools. To gather information on the attitudes and opinions of urban music teachers, we asked twenty-five state MEA presidents or executive secretaries representing large urban areas throughout the United States to provide the names and addresses of two or three established, successful urban music teachers in their region or state. We sent to these selected teachers a questionnaire that was designed to collect background information on their teaching experience and responses to four open-ended questions regarding different aspects of teaching music in the urban setting.

Twenty of the twenty-eight selected teachers responded, and their responses provide the basis for this article. (The participating teachers and their schools are identified at the end of the article.)

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Our Urban Representatives

The teachers who responded, ten males and ten females, were from urban schools in California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. Eight had bachelor's degrees, eleven had master's degrees, and one had a doctorate. The ranges in teaching experience varied from seven to thirty-two years, with the average number of years taught being twenty-two; of the twenty respondents, thirteen had twenty or more years of teaching experience.

These teachers have assignments

that span the spectrum of school music education from elementary to high school. Their work includes a variety of music teaching experiences providing a wide range of instructional foci, from traditional instrumental and vocal ensemble performance classes (band, orchestra, choir, and piano, for example) and traditional nonperformance classes (general music, music theory, and music history, for example) to selected specialty courses (music for foreign-born students and multicultural music, for example). The diversity of these individual assignments is staggering, with teacher responsibility sometimes limited to a single grade level and sometimes encompassing the entire K-12 instrumental and vocal music curriculum in a school.

What Teachers Said

Many of the actual responses from the teachers are found in the four sidebars accompanying this article. We attempted to summarize all of the responses to each of the questions to get an overall impression from teachers working in urban schools.

Our first question was "Do you feel that your undergraduate/graduate education courses prepared you to teach in the urban setting? If yes, what specific areas in your education prepared you? If no, what areas would you suggest need to be included?" Three

Questionnaire Item No. 1

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“Even though I was educated at a college located inside New York City, the faculty were many years removed from the experience of the contemporary urban classroom setting. Professors who are training today’s and tomorrow’s teachers must go into the public schools to see what the needs are of the students in urban schools. They must also communicate with the people who are teachers presently teaching in these situations.”—*Kenneth Jernigan*

“More of the knowledge that I use on a daily basis has been gleaned from workshops, convention sessions, and in-service classes offered in large urban systems in which I have worked. One of the most valuable courses that I have taken was designed for business managers and presented on a limited basis in our school system. It taught us how to work with people. ... Classes in general teaching strategies with an emphasis on the learner (as opposed to the material) have also been usable and valuable, but I have rarely found another music teacher who felt that this kind of class was designed for a specialist.”—*Suzanne Shull*

teachers (one with a bachelor’s, one with a master’s, one with a doctorate) felt that their education had prepared them for teaching in the urban setting; twelve (four with bachelor’s, eight with master’s) felt that their education had clearly not prepared them for teaching in the urban setting; and four (two with bachelor’s, two with master’s) felt that while aspects of their education (especially performance, theory, and music history) were valuable, they were not prepared by their educational training for teaching in the urban setting. Among those who indicated they were prepared, most felt their musical training was both sufficiently extensive and intensive and had an impact on their preparedness for teaching in the urban setting.

The majority of the respondents felt woefully unprepared to teach in the urban setting. While several felt *musically* prepared, they said their pre-service education prepared them for teaching the “ideal” student and left them unprepared for the reality of urban schools, where most of the students do not conform to the ideal.

According to these urban teachers, more training is required to help prospective music teachers deal with some of the complex emotions of students from differing social and economic backgrounds. A particular concern is dealing with students affected by various types of family situations or crises such as single-parent or no-parent households, children having the responsibility for raising other siblings, teenage pregnancies, students ejected from their homes, and custody battles. Teachers who are in an urban situation have to be prepared to help mediate some of the effects of these events in students’ lives.

Several teachers said that many of the teacher-education courses, and the professors who taught these courses, were many years removed from the reality of modern urban schools and consequently lacked relevancy. The teachers felt that increased contact between teacher-preparation institutions and the urban schools would help professors keep pace with the status of students and their needs. One teacher mentioned that her graduate

studies were more realistic and more practical than her undergraduate coursework; however, she felt that most of what was of value in her day-to-day teaching was the result of participating in a number of workshops and clinics. While one teacher noted that experience and maturity are the ultimate sources of help in dealing with the situations that urban music teachers encounter, several others agreed that prospective teachers would benefit from increased attention to student differences, differing life styles, classroom and rehearsal management, and methods for demonstrating to students and parents that they are valued as individuals irrespective of race, economic status, or other external conditions.

Our second question was “Can you describe one or two specific teaching techniques, strategies, or approaches that you found to be particularly effective for teaching music in the urban situation?” Generally, the teachers suggested that individual teachers should experiment and see which techniques work in a specific setting. It was noted, however, that before any teaching could take place, the teacher must have the respect of the students and control of the teaching/learning environment. Of particular importance is that all teachers should be well-informed regarding the materials and content in their subject areas, especially with regard to having knowledge of as many instruments and performing artists as possible. Familiarity with the application of current technology is also important, according to the respondents. Finally, they suggested that teachers must find a way to relate to the students initially and then adapt the curriculum with that in mind.

Many of the respondent teachers reported that one way to relate to students is to allow students to have input regarding their instruction. Small-group activities and cooperative learning were mentioned as ways of involving students in decision making. Another successful method was to use experienced students as tutors, section leaders, and peer teachers. This is particularly important because teachers in an urban situation are often teaching

very musically inexperienced beginning students—so-called raw beginners.

The third question was "What factors have most contributed to your personal success as a music teacher in the urban setting?" Several teachers identified various types of support networks of teachers, supervisors, mentors, and others that helped them meet their goals as teachers. Some said that they have continued to study education through professional clinics and conferences on a regular basis. Others also mentioned that they have continued to be active consumers of the arts, and that opportunities to see performing groups should be increased for those teachers who live in large urban centers with access to thriving arts communities.

Many other factors that go beyond the music classroom were mentioned as contributors to the success of these urban music educators. These factors include developing relationships between the students and the parents; being a leader and contributing citizen in the school community; maintaining solid relationships with the guidance staff, other teachers, and administrators; and being supportive of students while consistently adhering to rules and policy, thereby developing a classroom discipline plan that really works. It is also necessary to have the use of facilities, equipment, and materials.

The final question the teachers were asked was "Do you have any general observations for ways to improve music education in the urban schools?" The responses reflected perceived teacher-training needs in management skills, knowledge of materials (particularly the selection of repertoire), and knowledge of the psychology of urban students. According to the respondents, the teacher trainers themselves have to be genuinely qualified, knowledgeable regarding the application of technology, and familiar with methods for developing and incorporating a multicultural curriculum. It was noted that due to the increasing diversity of the urban student population, multicultural education is uniquely suited to the urban environment. Some individuals also suggested that programs specifically aimed at reaching children

Questionnaire Item No. 2

Can you describe one or two specific teaching techniques, strategies, or approaches that you found to be particularly effective for teaching music in the urban setting?

"Nothing but experience and maturity can prepare you to handle some of the situations that you will confront."—*George DeGraffenreid*

"A good teacher bridges education gaps. Find out where students are, know where you want them to be, and build the bridge."—*Betty Link*

"You can only stop so many times and explain something. You have to go on. I can't save everyone. Treat everyone fairly, honestly, and with discipline even if it hurts sometimes. There have been disappointments, but the success for the program and the students has been great."—*George Paris*

"I stress performance—extensive use of the popular culture is used as a basis for performance in vocal, dance, and musical theater. Scheduling a performance every other month keeps students and the music specialist on their toes—'come see what we do!'"—*Virginia T. Lam*

"By teaching students skills, I sent the message that I cared about their education and growth; by letting them have some choices, I told them that I cared about them as individuals."—*Suzanne Shull*

"I try to use a variety of activities in each lesson in order to accommodate the various learning styles of the students within each class setting. This makes it possible for every child to succeed at something in my class. This increases their self-esteem and gives them something about which to feel positive. For many of these students, school is the only place that they can get any kind of positive reinforcement."—*Beth Henry*

"Since any background in music is woefully absent, any activity involving listening to, performing, or reading about music subjects seems to be effective. Most students particularly respond to performances by professional musicians brought into the school or going to an orchestra hall to hear professional performances."—*John C. Cina*

"Orff-Schulwerk is based on things children like to do: sing, chant, rhyme, clap, dance, and keep beat on anything near at hand. ... [It] is designed for all children, not just the privileged, talented, or select few. Each child contributes according to ability. The atmosphere is noncompetitive and children enjoy the pleasure of making music with others. ... Orff-Schulwerk provides a balance between emotional and intellectual stimulation to develop healthy human beings."—*Jo-Ann W. Kilton*

Questionnaire Item No. 3

What factors have most contributed to your personal success as a music teacher in the urban setting?

"The opportunity to share both joy and problems with my peers has been a factor in my success. ... I listen to recordings of college and professional bands and regularly attend Chicago Symphony concerts lest I lower my standard of musicianship. I subscribe to a number of professional journals, including *The Instrumentalist*, *Music Educators Journal*, and the *Journal of Research in Music Education*."—*Sue Glossop*

"I believe that students will give only as much as you ask. I make high demands on the students personally and musically. Mediocrity is not okay. Setting high goals, being a positive role model, and going the extra mile are characteristics that I work for."—*Richard K. Kusk*

"As a teacher in New York City, the keys [to success] are [that] you had better love teaching, be a strong disciplinarian, be organized and prepared, be creative, and be flexible. ... Most New York schools are undermanned, underequipped, underfinanced, and there is a lack of [suitable] learning space. For this reason, a teacher must be flexible and prepared. Creativity is also a must. You never know when your department will be severely changed due to budget cuts, administrative ignorance, or whim."—*Kenneth Jernigan*

"I take time to communicate with students during nonteaching periods. Sometimes it is more important to talk to students than only worrying about correct fingerings. My students are from the Cabrini-Green projects, the affluent Lincoln Park area, and from the entire city. They all have the common desire to be treated with respect, encouragement, and understanding."—*George Paris*

"School is, for many students, an oasis from the harshness of the urban environment. Because the school is an oasis, I set a standard of behavior in the classroom that I expect everyone in the classroom to abide by. They do! I have students from the most deplorable home/neighborhood situations who have been some of the most dedicated and "successful" students. Contrary to wisdom, most students, though at times they may appear to act otherwise, want to be related to as people, not as a member of some racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group. Although I am very sensitive to where my students come from, when it comes to music, they are in my eyes just students interested in doing music."—*George DeGraffenreid*

of a low economic status need to be articulated and integrated in the school curriculum. Another suggestion was offering extracurricular programs to students and adults during the evening and summers.

Other responses focused on enhancing the relationships among music teachers, administrators, and

music supervisors to provide the best environment to facilitate an inner-city program. Having all of the constituencies involved in dialogue, rather than parallel monologues, for the advancement of the students' music education is perhaps one of the central features of successful urban school music programs, according to the respondents.

Conclusions

The responses reflect some of the attitudes, beliefs, strategies, and techniques that these selected urban music teachers were willing to share with the rest of the profession in an effort to enhance the quality of urban music education. All of the teachers' responses reflect a genuine commitment to music, to music education, and to the students in their charge. Moreover, there is a commitment on the part of each of these teachers to overcome the unique set of challenges of the urban school, to take advantage of the unique rewards of such teaching, and to provide a quality music education to the young people in their classes as they begin to develop their lifelong relationship with music. While the information we have presented may not reflect a scientific sampling of urban music teachers' views, this does not diminish the importance of those views. We believe that both those who framed the responses to the questionnaire and those who read this article will gain new perspectives with respect to teaching music in urban America.

Note

We wish to recognize these teachers for their significant contribution to this article and their ongoing contribution to urban music education:

Bob R. Barnette, Central High School, Macon, Georgia; Grades 9–12; beginning band, intermediate band, marching band, symphonic band.

Grady Black, Jr., Brainerd High School, Chattanooga, Tennessee; Grades 9–11; secondary instrumental music, general music, varsity band (concert and marching).

John C. Cina, Lane Technical High School, Chicago, Illinois; Grades 9–12; beginning strings, intermediate strings, symphony orchestra (advanced strings).

George DeGraffenreid, Van Nuys High School, Van Nuys, California; Grades 9–12; orchestra, band (concert and marching), jazz ensemble, keyboard, song writing.

Sue Glossop, Beasley Academic Center, Chicago, Illinois; Grade 4; music literacy, music appreciation.

Beth Henry, Riverdale Elementary School, Jonesboro, Georgia; Grades K–5; elementary

general music.

Kenneth Jernigan, Hastings High School, Hudson, New York; Grades 6–12; concert band (high school and middle school), general music (middle school), jazz ensemble (high school).

Jo-Ann W. Kilton, Hendrick Hudson School, Webster, New York; Grades 1–6; elementary general music, primary chorus, intermediate chorus.

Michele D. Kneer, Von Steuben and Longfellow Middle School, Peoria, Illinois; Grades 5–8; general music, chorus, beginning choir chimes, intermediate choir chimes, show choir.

Richard K. Kusk, Coronado High School, Colorado Springs, Colorado; Grades 9–12; orchestra, marching band, wind ensemble, concert band, jazz band, pep band.

Virginia T. Lam, Wanamaker Middle School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Grades 6–7 and special education; general music, choir, dance, drama.

Betty Link, Herbert Hoover Middle School, San Francisco, California; Grades 6–8; chorus (grades 7–8), unified arts (grades 6–7), keyboard (grade 8), instrumental and vocal music (K–6), general music.

Charles Lute, Academy High School, Erie, Pennsylvania; Grades 9–12; music theory I & II, orchestra, percussion ensemble, jazz band, concert band.

Jack Martens, Benjamin Franklin Middle School, Pleasant Hill (San Francisco), California; Grades 6–8, band.

Andrea H. Morris, Franklin D. Roosevelt High School, Brooklyn, New York; Grades 9–12; music appreciation, beginning piano, intermediate piano, advanced piano (piano lab), music theory, music for foreign-born students (recorder, violin, piano—introduction; multicultural music).

Don Reginald Ogletree, Tri-Cities High School, East Point, Georgia; Grades 9–12; choral music.

Mary Jo Papich, Woodruff High School, Peoria, Illinois; Grades 9–12; instrumental music, music theory, music history.

George Paris, Lincoln Park High School, Chicago, Illinois; Grades 9–12; beginning band, intermediate band, advanced band, advanced concert band.

Nancy Shankman, Christopher Columbus High School, Staten Island, New York; Grades 9–10; combined chorus, ensemble (chamber singers).

Suzanne Shull, Ridgeview Middle School, Atlanta, Georgia; Grades 6–8; general music, chorus. ■

Questionnaire Item No. 4

Do you have any general observations for ways to improve music education in the urban schools?

“Music education in the inner city will not improve until we stop spoon-feeding our students, raise our expectations, and develop critical thinkers who will challenge us to improve our teaching skills. We, the teachers, are the ones who set limits on what children can learn.”—*Sue Glossop*

“We need to know more about inner-city schools, students, discipline, etc. ... We need to learn how to better educate and control these students.”—*Michele D. Kneer*

“It is not enough to fill a music [teaching] position with a qualified music instructor. The position must be filled with the “right” qualified music instructor. Students are too sensitive and aware to have anyone sent to them to teach them. Even if [the students] are totally unaware of a teacher’s personal feelings for them, whether they be feelings of concern or the lack of, many times the students’ personal circumstances are just too overwhelming for them to be ‘turned on’ to music education. The key is to have an instructor who can truly accept a position of challenge and meet it with expectation of great success despite the odds. He or she must look beyond what exists and be willing to create the right atmosphere and program based on a realistic analysis of the situation in which he or she will be teaching. In order to be a success in the business of music teaching, one must first be in the business of people.”—*Don Reginald Ogletree*

“I am afraid that my outlook is very general, applicable to all teachers of urban children: small classes; more opportunities for successful performance and positive feedback; teachers who believe anything is possible; mentoring by successful adults in the community; and treating children as individuals rather than members of a particular group.”—*Suzanne Shull*

“Develop programs that include performance/reward starting at the early grades through high school. Have the music program coordinated. ... Let high school students work as mentors for middle school students, one on one. Show by example. This works in [other academic subjects] and can work in music education.”—*Charles Lute*

“Take every sincere student who wants to be involved in music into the music classes or ensembles. If the student is willing to work, let him. In an urban school, one does not have the luxury of turning anyone away. ... Although I am striving to produce the best music that the ensembles are capable of, the students know that I am far more interested in them being the best people they can be. The rehearsals are all music business, but I talk to them about many things, other than music, outside of the classroom.”—*George DeGraffenreid*