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The Return: A Music Teacher Educator Goes Back to the Elementary Music Classroom

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The Return: A Music Teacher Educator Goes Back to the Elementary Music Classroom

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*I'm back
flashbacking back
to the school I was at
teaching music at
to every 5–13-year-old
for five years of our lives.*

*It's a six week gig.
The music teacher is going on leave
word is out that I want back in
I get the call:
“will you do it?”*

I answer yes.

*She meets me
tells me
I've got lots to
“pack in”
in the 6 weeks.
Lots of music theory
and music listening
and lots of singing quality
repertoire.
Oh, and there's assessment.
You can do that because you're experienced
and I never had the time
so could you assess
this
this
this
this
and that?*

*I immediately think:
SUBVERSION.
Is this what I signed on for?
Leaving the world of
music educator academic guy
to come back*

for this?

*It felt good
meeting up with colleagues
I hadn't seen for years:
Older teachers
mostly happy
in their job.*

*And parents
who came up to me
(a couple of whom I had taught
way back when I was first
at the school).*

*Good vibes
a new music room
(same old music resources)
and best of all
Monday morning
excited children
waiting
to come inside
for music.*

*So I stand
walk from my desk
open the door
(with a mild case of the
belly butterflies) ...
And in we walk
singing
smiling
as one.*

*This feels
right
this feels good
being back in the saddle
the same old saddle
on the same old horse
in the same old OK coral
in the same old wild west
where time
has stood very

still.*

Having spent seven years as a teacher educator (and more specifically a music teacher educator), I resigned from the university I was employed at two years ago. This was quite a

radical thing for a middle-aged man with a mortgage and young family to do—at least financially. But I felt the need for change. Quite simply, I was feeling burnt out, in a similar way to the way I had felt some decade earlier when I was in my fifth year as a classroom primary (elementary) music teacher. It was time for a change.

This change took the form of taking up a job in a government department. In this capacity I spent most of my days at a desk in front of a computer screen, or in various meetings. At first such a lifestyle was quite appealing: unlike the life of a primary school teacher or a teacher educator, this job began at 9 a.m. and abruptly ended each day at 5 p.m. Weeknights and weekends were free of any work. This was the first time I had experienced this in my working life.

I lasted five very long months. By that time I felt as if I was going insane. There seemed to be no purpose in the work I was being paid to undertake, and I missed being a teacher. Even though I had not been a primary school music teacher for more than seven years I still thought of myself as a teacher. I missed being around people where I saw my role as somebody who could help educate others.

The world was not my oyster. I had resigned from two jobs in the space of six months, which is not a good look on any CV. But even so, I was not concerned because I was a teacher. I had kept my teaching registration current, as if in the back of my mind I always saw this profession as something I could fall back on, and fall back on it I did. I registered to be a “relief” (substitute) teacher on a Thursday morning. The next day at 7 a.m. I got a call asking me if I was available to teach. I was.

I spent the next three months as a substitute teacher, never spending more than two days in a row in the one school. I enjoyed this immensely. I felt revitalised and wanted to go back to being a teacher educator in a full-time capacity. With little left to lose, I contacted my former university and asked if they would have me back. They would, at the beginning of the following academic year. This left me with three months of substitute teaching. I couldn't have been happier—particularly when I was asked if I would be available to do a six week teaching block as classroom music teacher at Somerset Primary school, the school I had been a classroom music teacher at prior to becoming a teacher educator. I didn't hesitate. It was a resounding “Yes, I'll do it”.

As the poem that opened this article suggests, it was immediately apparent that not a lot had changed at this school since I had last taught there. As the poem hopefully suggests to

you as reader, it simply felt “right” going back and becoming a classroom music teacher again.

In this article I explore two aspects of my identity as an educator: (1) my identity as a classroom music teacher back teaching at Somerset Primary school; and (2) my identity as a music teacher educator upon my return to full-time university employment following six months of substitute teaching, including the block of teaching at Somerset Primary. In exploring these two aspects of music teacher identity I continue telling stories of my experiences, because as Watson (2006, 525) reminds us, telling stories is in fact “‘doing’ identity work,” in that “telling stories involves reflection on, selection of and arrangement of events in an artful manner which contains meaning for the teller and seeks to persuade the listener of their significance.”

I come to this identity storying with certain assumptions that are supported in the identity literature. At the forefront of these beliefs is that I inhabit multiple role identities, depending on the context that I find myself in (Stryker and Burke, 2000). That is, I view my identity as a classroom primary school music teacher in a different way to my identity as a music teacher educator. However, there is a blurring between the two, some common ground if you will (i.e., I see myself as a *teacher* in each of the two roles). I also come to this identity work accepting that my identity is relational, whereby I can recognise that my identity shifts according to the relationships with others that I might be in (Watson, 2006). Finally, I have a core belief that role support (or the absence of role support) impacts on my identity (Bouij, 2004). This belief emerged in my first year as a classroom music teacher where I strongly felt the absence of role support, being isolated within my school community as the only classroom music teacher.

Back to school

Upon my return to Somerset Primary I revelled in being a classroom primary school music teacher. I simply enjoyed school life, taking class after class, conducting the two school choirs, talking with the itinerant instrumental music teachers, having a coffee in the staffroom when school had finished, even attending staff meetings. I was immediately accepted by my peers and the children as the music teacher. My ability to “do the job” was never questioned. This acceptance was a major contributor to immediately identifying myself as the school classroom music teacher. In my first three weeks I did not think of my teaching at Somerset

Primary as being something that would benefit my other identity (and the identity I would assume full-time the following year) as a teacher educator. I simply took pleasure in immersing myself in being the classroom music teacher.

This immediate acceptance of an identity I had not embraced for seven years was due to two significant factors: role support from peers and children, and positive emotional rewards for “doing the job.” For an identity to thrive it needs to be supported by others (Roberts, 2006; Bouij, 2004), or as Roberts (2004) writes, “An identity is very hard and frustrating to support without the ratification of others” (37). I experienced this role support immediately. Staff who I had known when I had previously taught at Somerset Primary not only welcomed me back, but told me they were so happy that I was going to be the music teacher again. When teachers accompanied their children to the music room they would stop and briefly talk to me, often reminding their children to be well behaved and to enjoy themselves. This was only a little thing, but sent a clear message to their children that they supported me as the music teacher. The principal of the school walked into my classroom twice in the first week and made the time to tell me I was doing a great job and the school was lucky to snare me. Parents would stop and talk to me after school telling me it was great to have me back and that their children were enjoying coming to music. The children themselves also supported this role identity: not once was I questioned about being “the music teacher”.

Children provided positive feedback to my teaching—immediate positive feed (“I love that song, can we sing it again?”; “That game is so much fun, can we play it again?”; “I was going to quit choir but I’m not now because it’s so much fun”). This immediate positive feedback about my teaching not only supported my role identity, but resulted in positive emotional rewards. Quite simply, their enjoyment and responsiveness to my teaching made me feel good. Dolloff (2007) reminds us that “What is missing from most discussions of teacher identity in music is the role that emotion plays in the initial construction, as well as reconstruction and restoration, of our teacher identities” (11). In feeling good about my teaching my identity as the classroom music teacher was further reinforced. The positive feedback I was getting from children was spontaneous, something largely absent when I was a music teacher educator. Positive feedback about my lecturing came from occasional comments from students or in emails from students (the kind where a student is emailing to request something, and the email ends with “By the way, I’m really enjoying your class”), and in the end of semester teaching evaluations. However, it lacked the immediacy of the positive

feedback I received from children, and dare I say the sheer volume of positive feedback that children provided, compared to the more sporadic nature of such feedback in a tertiary setting.

The challenges in my initial weeks teaching at Somerset Primary were not musical challenges; I presented the kinds of musical activities previously presented to children when I was a classroom music teacher and to my students as a music teacher educator. Likewise, the repertoire I conducted and accompanied on the piano for choirs was familiar to me and not of a particularly musically challenging level in terms of my musicianship. Rather, as Teachout (1997) identified in a study of pre-service and experienced teachers' opinions of skills and behaviours important to successful music teaching, I found that it was general teaching skills I was focusing on, namely classroom management. It had been eight years since I had taught children classroom music, and classroom management was a challenge in some classes. I spoke to the teachers of two classes in the first week about classroom management strategies they used so that there would be consistency for the students. These conversations proved to be very useful over subsequent weeks where classroom management strategies were catered for specific children in these classes, and were proactive rather than reactive.

My lunch hours were spent either conducting choirs or doing playground duty. However, I always had fifteen minutes from the end of lunch time until my next class when I could sit down and relax for the first time since the school day had begun. It was at these times that I would sit down at the piano and just play—initially, repertoire that I had memorised in the past; then, as the days progressed, I would bring in sheet music from home to play. It was in my second week at Somerset Primary that a teacher in a nearby classroom commented that she looked forward to these times after lunch when I would play. She said that her class would read and just enjoy my playing! This was not so much an acknowledgement of me as music teacher, but me as musician.

Roberts (2000) writes as a music educator there is the “personal war between oneself as a musician and as a teacher” (73). For me, that war well and truly had been over for many years. My doctoral research was a self-study of my life as a classroom music teacher. One of the central themes that emerged from this work was my gradual loss of identity as a musician as I spent more and more time as a music teacher in primary schools. After six years of teaching I no longer identified myself as a musician. I was a practising musician only in the sense of the music making I did at school—whether that be singing, conducting, playing piano, or composing music with and for children. In my initial years as a classroom music

teacher I fought to retain an identity as a musician, and in particular a performer, taking the time to play the piano or violin at lunch time and outside of school. However, as my years as a classroom music teacher progressed, and then as I moved into tertiary education, I spent less and less time involved in this type of music making. As a result I no longer identified as being a musician.

Playing the piano after lunch at Somerset Primary was not about me wanting to “perform” music for an audience. I fell back into this practice of playing the piano; it was a way for me to relax and simply enjoy the kind of music making in which I had engaged in the past, throughout high school and my undergraduate university course. Although there was no “socially constructed support” for me as a musician-performer (Roberts 2004, 37) in the school, this was something I felt comfortable doing as it was something I had struggled to maintain in my former life as a classroom music teacher. This was a form of revisiting a past identity issue.

The story so far of my return to Somerset Primary school as the classroom music teacher is clearly a positive one. I enjoyed the job, feeling comfortable as a classroom music teacher. However, in the final three weeks of my time teaching at Somerset Primary another me emerged: the critically reflective music teacher educator. That is, I identified aspects of my job that did not sit well with me. I encountered situations that I had warned pre-service music teachers about in the past. Could I preach one thing and enact something else? Yes, because I had to; it was part of the agreement about what I would do as substitute music teacher over the six weeks. There were two core tasks that I had been asked to perform by the ongoing classroom music teacher I was substituting for in the final three weeks: (1) test the grade 4 children’s musical aptitude and assign them orchestral instruments that they would learn the following year; and (2) administer written examinations, mark them, and record their grades for student report cards.

The musical aptitude test, the Bentley *Measures of Musical Abilities*, was the same aptitude test I had used when I began as a classroom music teacher. As a beginning teacher I liked the way the test could be administered in half an hour, and it was easy to mark. However, it soon became apparent that this testing measure was not always an accurate representation of students’ musical aptitude. Being a written based test, some students struggled to accurately record their written responses. Other students would complain that the questions (on an audio recording) were presented too quickly, so they would either stop

writing or provide random responses. As a result I not only administered this test, but conducted a variety of other practical aptitude tests, as well as having conversations with children about their level of interest in learning a musical instrument and the types of instruments they thought they might like to learn. At Somerset Primary my instructions were *just* to administer the test, and on the basis of these results select children to try musical instruments that they might learn the following year. When I asked if I might also interview children and conduct additional aptitude tests I was told there would be no time for this because I also had to administer written examinations, mark these, and provide grades for students' report cards. I balked at the idea of assessing students' musicianship and engagement with music solely through written testing. Again, I requested that time be devoted to alternative assessment modes that allowed children to demonstrate their music making in a practical, musical way. Request denied.

As I undertook these two tasks I knew they were not best practice. As one class was completing their written examination I sat there thinking that this would be a perfect example for pre-service teachers of inauthentic music assessment. My music teacher educator identity had come to the fore, leaving me as classroom music teacher in a state of limbo because I was not empowered to make the changes in this task that I believed were needed. What I was experiencing was what Frierson-Campbell (2004) refers to as the “disconnect between teachers' descriptions of their jobs and the ideals of music education with which they identify” (6).

This disconnect was further reinforced as my stay at Somerset Primary came to a conclusion. The last two weeks were a busy time of year for students and teachers alike, with student testing, a variety of school excursions and incursions, and teacher professional development occurring.¹ As a result I experienced attitudes from teachers and school administrators that brought back the frustrations I had experienced in the past as a classroom music teacher. That is, music was simply not valued by other staff when competing with other school based activities, and was often dropped in favour of other activities. This first occurred when a number of upper primary school teachers opted not to bring their classes to their weekly music lesson with me as they wanted to focus on in-class testing. This provided me with some much needed time to plan future music lessons, but clearly privileged in-class testing above music. In another incident, teachers were taken from classes for in-school professional development. Rather than bring in other teachers to “cover” for the teachers'

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absences, specialist teachers (music, physical education, languages other than English) were taken from their classes and assigned to supervise the children whose teachers were undertaking professional development. And finally, a number of classes were scheduled to attend an incursion when they had their scheduled weekly music lesson. I was asked to supervise the children at the incursion, thus resulting in their missing out on their weekly music lesson.

I was frustrated, but realised that as a substitute teacher there was little I could do. However, when some teachers in the staff room were talking about how important the “core curriculum” of literacy and numeracy was being eroded by “frills subjects like the arts,” I could not hold back. I waited until they had vented, then calmly told them that there was a body of research which clearly points to student engagement in the arts being beneficial to their cognitive, social, and personal development. I offered to bring in some research articles that not only demonstrated this, but provided some useful suggestions about arts-based activities that can be implemented in the generalist classroom. I was thanked for my kind offer but told that was okay: “We’ll just keep sending our classes to the weekly music lesson.” As a music teacher it frustrated me that these generalist classroom teachers did not want to engage with music in their classrooms, and as a teacher educator I found it frustrating that they were disinclined to engage with current research literature.

But I was the substitute music teacher. How much further could I go with this casual staff room conversation? Not far, as it turned out. I talked up the specialist music lesson, what happens, how the children enjoy these lessons, how it was part of a rounded education. In doing this I was “compartmentalising” parts of my music teacher identity (Dolloff, 2007, 2), parts that had strong links to my music teacher educator identity where teaching was firmly grounded in not only my own research, but the research of others.

Ultimately my experience teaching back at Somerset Primary revealed that I had multiple role identities according to the emerging teaching context, and in particular my interactions with students and teachers. Identity competition (Stryker and Burke, 2000) emerged after my initial weeks of immersing myself in my role as classroom music. I saw my more critical stance of the role that music played in the school as being part of my music teacher educator identity as I tended to be more critical as a music teacher educator than I had been when I initially began my career as a classroom music teacher. My teacher educator identity contributed to a kind of “identity competition” (Stryker and Burke, 2000, 290) with

my initial classroom music teacher identity. In particular the loss of role support I felt in my final two weeks teaching at Somerset Primary contributed to my changing classroom music teacher identity.

Back to academia

I almost strutted into my first lecture back at university when I informed my students that what they were about to hear was not just from books, but from my “real life experience as a teacher over the last six months.” I wore this experience like a badge, not only in lectures to my students, but with my colleagues. My mantra was how beneficial having been back in the classroom had been, and how it had reinvigorated me as a teacher educator. I conducted tutorials with a renewed sense of confidence, having students undertake performance and composition tasks that I had had children engage in over the previous six months. I would talk about what had worked for me in terms of pedagogy and what changes I had had to make in classrooms to ensure students were engaged and learning music. I provided examples of the types of musical works children had produced under my guidance.

It was only when a number of students commented that they enjoyed my classes because we “we talk about things *and* we do things” that I critically reflected on my lecturing and tutoring at university now compared to my lecturing and tutoring in the past. I came to the conclusion that now, more than in any point in my career as a lecturer, I was not only involving my students in active music making, but I was also endeavouring to connect this experiential learning to my own experiences in classrooms teaching music and in turn to theory. The inclusion of reflecting on my own experiences recently teaching in primary schools was the new ingredient, an ingredient that helped to fuse students’ experiential learning with theory. That is, through their own experience making and creating music and my reflections about how I taught children to create and make music, students were able to theorise their music learning and the music learning of children that they would be teaching. In drawing on my recent experiences of being a classroom music teacher I was not letting go of this identity and taking back my music teacher educator identity. Rather, my identity as a classroom music teacher supported my music teacher educator identity. In having this recent classroom music teaching experience to draw on in my teaching at the tertiary level, this mixed identity felt like one of the dimensions of identity outlined by Wenger, namely “identity as learning trajectory where we define who we are by where we have been and

where are going” (1998, 149). I felt that as a teacher educator I had *learnt* how to more effectively teach my preservice teachers about teaching music as a result of my recent experiences teaching music to primary school students. Thus I drew on where I had recently been (primary school music teaching) and was looking forward in terms of being a more effective music teacher educator by drawing on these experiences.

My identity as a music teacher educator is still in a “process of becoming” (Dinkelman et al., 2006a). My recent experiences teaching primary school classroom music have contributed to this ongoing identity process. As part of this process I can also see that two of the core identity issues identified in my return to being a classroom music teacher were clearly apparent upon my return to being a music teacher educator: (a) the importance of role support in identity construction, and (b) my identity (or relative lack of identity) as a musician.

When I talk to other music teacher educators who work in Australian universities we tend to bemoan the fact that music education is not as privileged as we believe it should be. When together at music education conferences I specifically identify myself as a music teacher educator because, like my colleagues, I teach teachers to teach music. In addition, my research (and that of my colleagues) lies in the specific fields of music learning and music education. And yet, many music teacher educators lecture in areas beyond the field of music education as well: some of us teach across arts education, others in areas as diverse as educational philosophy, education leadership and teaching studies. We are not just music teacher educators, then, but teacher educators. My identity as a teacher educator is supported by other music teacher educators who are in circumstances similar to mine.

Back at my university I am one of four teacher educators who, in various courses, teach preservice teachers how to teach music. I feel role support from these colleagues who face issues similar to mine, pedagogical and otherwise. This day-to-day role support from colleagues who teach what I teach is something that was largely absent when I was a primary school classroom music teacher.

As a teacher educator I also find role support from other teacher educators who do not teach music education. We have many things in common, where we interact and communicate on different levels in order to perform our jobs as teacher educators. These include conducting research, undertaking administrative duties, providing service to the community, being part of writing and reading groups, and attending faculty seminars. As a result of this role support—

as a music teacher educator and as a teacher educator—I have a strong identity as a teacher educator, albeit one who still draws on his identity as a classroom music teacher.

Although I returned to my identity as musician (albeit briefly) through post-lunchtime piano playing when teaching back at Somerset Primary, this has not continued upon my return to being a teacher educator. Quite simply, I rarely have the time—or rarely make the time—to sit down and play the piano. Instead, my identity as musician has been restricted to what Regelski (2007) refers to as being an “on-the-job” performer (10), in my lectures and tutorials where I demonstrate music making—whether that be singing, playing the piano, conducting, or playing percussion instruments—and engage in music making in this way with preservice teachers. Recently this has been a source of frustration for me, as I know and understand how powerful playing music can be for me beyond this on-the-job music making.

Do I compensate for this? Yes, in identifying myself as being a creative individual. Initially this emerged in my being a musician. Subsequently I have begun to think of the way I teach as creative. However, I more specifically identify creativity in my role as a teacher educator as emerging in what I write and the way I write. I began this article with a piece of poetry. This is not the first time I have written poetry as part of my academic writing output. I have endeavoured to use my creative writing—through poetry, the short story, even an autobiographical novel—in the research I have conducted. Not only do I believe that these forms of writing provide readers with new ways of experiencing research, but they also act as a creative outlet for me as a teacher educator in a way not unlike the way performing music was for me as an undergraduate student learning violin and piano. That is, this writing is a creative outlet. When fashioning a poem I find myself in a state of creative immersion with language unlike other forms of writing. It is this kind of immersion that I had when playing piano and violin in the past, as opposed to playing and singing in class as an on-the-job performer.

Final thoughts

Dinkelman et al (2006b) argue that teachers who become teacher educators claim the dual citizenship of being teachers and teacher educators (133). My own experience upon returning to being a teacher educator from a brief period of teaching music in a primary school classroom certainly suggests this is the case. However, identifying this dual citizenship oversimplifies my identity experience. My experiences back in the primary school classroom,

then returning to teacher education suggest that my identity has been somewhat fluid, changing according to a number of variables, including role support, emotional rewards, compartmentalising parts of my identity depending on my audience, the positioning of myself in terms of the type of musician I am, and the need to be a creative individual. As I sit at my computer writing these words I have been interrupted many times today—by colleagues, students, a school principal, even a group of local school children who have been on campus as part of an undergraduate class. This reminds me of what Clandinin, Downey, and Huber (2009) have written: “Our lives as teacher educators are intimately interwoven with the lives of teachers, children, and youth” (142). It is this interweaving that contributes to the very complex nature of teacher educator identity. I would argue that it is not only this interweaving with these players in our lives at this moment, but the way we have interacted and interweaved with these people in the past. In my case, the fairly recent past of going back to teach music in primary schools has had a profound impact on my identity, firstly as a classroom music teacher, and subsequently as a teacher educator.

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Notes

¹ The distinction between an excursion and an incursion is an Australian phenomenon that may require some explanation. The term “incursion” is used to describe, for example, an event in which, rather than going off school grounds to hear a musical performance, the performing group comes to the school, sets up, and performs. This is occurring more and more because of litigation if children are injured when off campus on an excursion.

About the Author

Peter de Vries is a graduate of the University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, and Griffith University, where he completed his PhD in education. He is currently senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Peter has taught at

early childhood, primary, and tertiary levels. He is a composer of music for children, and has conducted research spanning early childhood and primary school music education. Peter is a passionate advocate for the inclusion of quality arts learning experiences for all children, from birth onwards, and continues to be involved in a variety of research projects that centre on young children's music learning, focusing on children, teachers and parental experiences.