

# Teacher Reflections on Undergraduate Music Education

By Timothy S. Brophy

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At the November 1999 Annual Conference of the American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA) in Phoenix, Arizona, AOSA president Linda Ahlstedt assembled a panel of music education leaders of the professional music education organizations that represent the "active music-making approaches" to music education in the United States. The purpose of this panel was to discuss the reform of undergraduate music education with the express purpose of incorporating these active music-making approaches into an "ideal undergraduate music education curriculum."

One of the initiatives that resulted from this panel discussion was the formation of the AOSA Ad Hoc Undergraduate Curriculum Reform Committee. The role of this committee was to design and distribute a survey nationwide to poll music educators about the strengths and weaknesses of their undergraduate music education. After several months of collaboration, a survey was designed entitled "Music Educator Survey: Reflections on Undergraduate Music Education." This survey was distributed as a detachable insert in the Summer 2000 issues of the *Orff Echo*, *Kodály Envoy*, and the newsletters of the Gordon Institute for Music Learning (the *Audea*) and the Dalcroze Society of America.

The survey was divided into four parts. Part A presented six questions requesting information about the respondent's teaching experience, undergraduate institution, and degrees held. Part B dealt with the type of teacher certification the respondent holds and how it was obtained. Part C presented questions about the respondent's delivery of music instruction, perceived preparation to teach the National Standards, and the type of specialized pedagogical training (Orff Schulwerk, Kodály, Dalcroze, and Gordon) obtained after earning the undergraduate degree. Part D was a series of open-ended questions, as follows:

- (a) Reflecting back on your undergraduate music education, what courses and/or experiences best prepared you for your post-graduate teaching assignment? How did these experiences and courses prepare you for your duties?
- (b) Continuing to reflect on your undergraduate music education, what courses and/or experiences least prepared you for your post-graduate teaching assignment? How did these courses and/or experiences fail to prepare you?
- (c) Were you provided coursework in Kodály, Orff-Schulwerk, Dalcroze Eurhythmics, and/or Gordon's Music Learning Theory as an undergraduate? Is it important for undergraduates to have coursework/training in these approaches/theories? Why or why not?
- (d) What courses or experiences would you like to see current music education undergraduates undertake in order to be fully prepared to teach in today's public schools? In other words, what would your idea of the "ideal undergraduate curriculum" include?
- (e) How do you feel about the importance of teaching internships, fieldwork, and practica in the undergraduate music education curriculum in relation to formal, "in-class" coursework? Can you recommend an "ideal balance" between the two?

Part D concluded with two more open-ended questions that were directed to respondents who had

worked recently with student teachers. These questions were as follows:

- (f) Please reflect upon the student teachers you have recently guided in your classroom. What have been their strongest areas of skill and preparedness? Their weakest?
- (g) What would you recommend to strengthen their skills and preparedness for their post-graduate teaching assignments?

Data from the surveys were tabulated and categorized by the co-chairs, and the results are presented and discussed in the remainder of this report. These results were reported at the November 2000 President's Panel held during the AOSA National Conference in Rochester, New York, but the data presented at that time did not reflect the 14 surveys received after that conference. This report presents results from the 237 respondents.

## **Part A: About the Respondents**

The 237 respondents represented 43 states. [Table 1](#) presents the respondents' descriptive data expressed as percentages. The majority of respondents (80.17%) were elementary classroom general music teachers. Of these, 21 taught both elementary and middle school, and 14 taught various combinations of levels and types of schools. The mean number of years of experience was 17.67, the median was 17.5, and the mode was 30 years. Over 97% of the respondents received their undergraduate education in the United States, and nearly two-thirds possessed a masters degree.

## **Part B: The Respondents' Certification**

A total of 92.35% of the respondents were certified teachers. Eighteen of these teachers (8.44%) had obtained certification through an alternative certification program, most commonly through postbaccalaureate special certification programs. Of these alternative certifications, 1.69% had received certification on an "emergency basis," where the certificate was issued prior to all of the certification requirements being met. Seven percent were not certified; these teachers were primarily postsecondary, private school, and studio music teachers.

Sixty-nine percent of the respondents held K–12 Vocal/Instrumental certificates. The remainder held either K–12 Vocal/General certificates (11%) or K–12 Instrumental certificates (6%). Seven percent held other types of certifications; these were primarily Music K–8 certifications or certifications in nonmusic fields with the respondent teaching outside of the field.

## **Part C: The Respondents' Classroom Music Instruction**

This part of the survey opened with a question that required the respondents to choose one of the following statements that most closely aligned with their own philosophy of music education:

The goal of school music education should be:

- (a) To educate the gifted and talented students in music and prepare the others to be discriminating music consumers.
- (b) Music competence for every student with opportunities for accelerated music education for the gifted and talented.

All but one respondent selected the latter statement pertaining to music competence for every child. The one respondent who did not choose this did not respond because he or she objected to the question.

When asked about the use of solfège in their music teaching, 85.65% reported the use of moveable

*do*, 4.65% reported using fixed *do*, and the remaining 9.7% did not employ either system. While the majority of the respondents reported that they did not experience the use of solfège in their undergraduate theory curriculum (57.38%), the majority (95.36%) believed that solfège should be a requirement of undergraduate theory. When asked about the type of rhythm syllables used in their teaching, the majority of respondents (92.38%) reported using vocables, most commonly the Kodály system (*ta, ti*, etc.). Some used words to teach rhythm (1.27%), some used counting (1.69%), and the remaining 11 teachers reported using no rhythm syllable system at all.

Respondents were then asked to reflect on their undergraduate preparation to teach music content and skills. The question was "When you began your teaching, did you feel prepared to teach the following?" A list of specific curricular areas related to the current National Standards for Music (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994) was provided: (a) singing, (b) playing instruments, (c) improvisation and composition, (d) reading and writing music, (e) listening, (f) interdisciplinary studies, and (g) relating music to history and culture. Respondents were required to provide a yes or no answer for each curricular area. [Table 2](#) presents these data. Perceived preparation to teach each area varied according to the curricular area and ranged from 65.68% reporting feeling prepared to teach historical and cultural connections to 11.39% feeling prepared to teach improvisation and composition.

For purposes of comparison, years of experience were grouped into three categories: 0.5–10 years, 11–20 years, and 21+ years. These experience categories were cross-tabulated with the seven curricular categories, and the results are presented in [Table 3](#). Differences among experience categories vary.

Because this survey went out to music educators with special interest or advanced training in Dalcroze Eurhythmics, Gordon Music Learning Theory, Kodály, and/or Orff-Schulwerk, information was requested regarding the extent to which the respondents had obtained specialized training in these pedagogies. These data are summarized in [Table 4](#).

## Part D: Open-Ended Questions

Because of the open-ended nature of the questions in this section, some of the responses represented personal opinions that could not be objectively analyzed and categorized. The data that could be analyzed were categorized and tallied by category.

[Table 5](#) presents the results of the questions requesting the names of the courses that respondents found most and least helpful in their undergraduate music education. Courses were only included if they were specifically mentioned in the response. Student-teaching and methods class were most frequently listed as the best courses for preparing the respondents to teach. Methods class and general education courses were most frequently listed as the least useful teacher preparation courses.

Because the respondents listed methods class as both a best and least useful course, responses were cross-tabulated with the years of experience categories. Teachers with 11–20 years of experience listed methods most often as their best course (44.44%,  $n = 36$ ), followed by the least experienced teachers (40.30%) and those with 21 or more years of experience (28.09%). Teachers with 21 or more years of experience listed methods most frequently as their least useful course (55.06%), followed by those with 11–20 years (34.57%) and 0.5–10 years in the classroom (32.84%).

When asked if they had experienced undergraduate coursework in Dalcroze, Gordon, Kodály, and Orff-Schulwerk, 83.54% responded that they had not. This finding is not surprising given that most of

these teachers obtained their undergraduate degrees over 17 years ago, when these pedagogies were not as widely known as they are today. The majority of respondents (94.09%) also felt that coursework in these pedagogies should be part of the undergraduate curriculum today. When asked to define the degree to which these pedagogies should be experienced in the undergraduate music education curriculum, 16.6% felt that an introductory exposure was sufficient, 64.25% thought that one or two levels was necessary, and 19.15% suggested that undergraduates should obtain complete certification in at least one of these pedagogies.

Tabulation of the courses suggested for the ideal undergraduate curriculum was achieved by counting those courses that were specifically listed in the responses. The most recommended courses were classroom management and solfège-based theory, followed by voice and piano skills. These results are shown in [Table 6](#).

When asked to define the "ideal balance" of field experience and coursework for undergraduate preservice music educators, the majority (66.95%) felt that a 50-50 balance was best. Over 19% responded that undergraduates needed more field experience and less class work; 4.24% felt they needed more class work and less field experience.

Ninety-three respondents answered the final two questions about their recent experiences with student teachers. Two categories of student-teacher weakness and strength emerged: musicianship and pedagogy. For this analysis, musicianship was defined to include all personal musical skills (in particular, voice and piano skills) and the students' ability to connect these skills to their teaching of music to children. Pedagogy was defined to include matters relating to teaching skills, including all aspects of lesson planning, sequential delivery of instruction, and classroom management.

These 93 respondents identified student-teacher strengths as follows: musicianship, 63%; pedagogy, 19%; and 4%, both pedagogy and musicianship. Student-teacher weaknesses were identified in the following percentages: musicianship, 18%; pedagogy, 71%; and 11%, both musicianship and pedagogy.

The final question on the survey asked the respondents to provide recommendations to improve the student teachers they with whom they had worked. The recommendations fell into four categories. Eighty-five percent suggested that student teachers receive more field experience in music education prior to the student-teaching experience. Eighty-six percent recommended increased pedagogy studies, and 27% recommended more coursework that focused on improving musicianship. Sixteen percent suggested that student teachers study methods with a professor/practitioner, a "master teacher" who still teaches music to children.

## **Summary of Certification and Instruction Findings**

- 1.** The majority of these respondents possess a masters degree and obtained their certification through traditional undergraduate programs in American universities and liberal arts colleges.
- 2.** The prevailing philosophy of music education among the respondents agrees with the statement "music competence for every student with opportunities for accelerated music education for the gifted and talented."
- 3.** The majority of respondents have advanced training in one or more of the following: Orff-Schulwerk, Kodály, Gordon Music Learning Theory, and Dalcroze Eurhythmics.
- 4.** The majority use moveable *do* for teaching melody and ear training while vocables are

used for teaching rhythm.

## Summary of Undergraduate Curricula Findings

1. At the beginning of their careers, the greatest number of respondents felt prepared to teach historical/cultural connections and reading/writing music and least prepared to teach improvisation and composition. Less than half felt prepared to teach singing and interdisciplinary studies and only slightly more than half felt prepared to teach listening and playing instruments.
2. Respondents listed student teaching and methods class as the most useful for their undergraduate preparation as teachers. The least useful courses were methods class and general education courses.
3. Solfège should be a requirement of undergraduate music theory classes.
4. The majority did not experience undergraduate coursework in any of these pedagogies (Orff-Schulwerk, Kodály, Gordon Music Learning Theory, and Dalcroze Eurhythmics), but felt that undergraduates should now obtain at least one level of training in one of these pedagogies prior to graduation.
5. Solfège-based theory, classroom management, voice skills, and piano skills were recommended most often as courses needed in an ideal undergraduate music education.
6. The undergraduate music education curriculum should be evenly divided between coursework and field experience.

## Summary of Student-Teacher Findings

1. Most student teachers possess adequate musicianship skills.
2. Student teachers are weakest in pedagogy-related areas, including (but not limited to) lesson planning, sequential delivery of instruction, and classroom management.
3. The majority of respondents recommended that student teachers receive increased field experience and pedagogy studies prior to student teaching.

## Discussion

This survey was distributed in journals and newsletters to the combined membership of the AOSA, OAKE, DSA, and GIML, a total of approximately 8,000 music educators in the United States. The response rate was low for such a widely distributed survey ( $N = 237$ ). While exact causes for the low rate of response cannot be determined, several factors may have contributed to this: (a) the indirect, nonrandom method of distribution (limited due to budget constraints), (b) the midsummer publication date, when most public school teachers are on vacation, and (c) the four-page format with several open-ended questions. The process of submitting completed surveys may have also impacted the return rate; no return envelope was provided. However, the 237 respondents comprise a well-educated and experienced sample of classroom music educators from a broad geographical area, and many of the surveys contained lengthy responses that clearly required a great deal of time and thought to complete. With these considerations in mind, the results of the survey can be interpreted to reveal some important insights into the respondents' reflections on their undergraduate music education.

Some results are not surprising, given the pedagogical training and philosophy of the respondents. For example, the high rate of agreement that solfège should be a requirement of undergraduate music theory classes is to be expected among teachers whose pedagogy makes use of this type of ear training.

This training and philosophy is also reflected in the high degree of agreement that undergraduate music educators should experience coursework in Orff-Schulwerk, Kodály, Dalcroze Eurhythmics, and Gordon Music Learning Theory. There were also a high number of respondents who felt that undergraduates should graduate with at least one level of training in one of these pedagogies. This result suggests that the majority of members in these organizations may not agree with the current requirement that teachers possess one or more years of classroom music experience as a prerequisite for this training. The finding that student teachers possess inadequate pedagogy skills may have also been partially influenced by the training and philosophy of the respondents, especially if the student teachers were not provided coursework or experience in the respondent's specific pedagogy prior to the student-teaching experience.

The results regarding the respondents' perceived preparation to teach singing, playing instruments, improvisation and composition, reading and writing music, interdisciplinary studies, listening, and historical/cultural connections suggest that undergraduates are beginning their careers with varying degrees of preparation in each area. There appears to be the greatest need for increased instruction in the pedagogy of improvisation and composition. The finding that less than half of the respondents felt prepared to teach singing—one of the primary activities in elementary general music—suggests that more emphasis is necessary in this area.

The usefulness of methods class in teacher preparation is related to the respondents' number of years of experience. A majority of respondents with 21 or more years of experience—presumably those who took undergraduate methods over 20 years ago—listed methods as one of their least useful courses. This percentage dropped among the teachers with the least years of experience. While this can be cautiously interpreted to indicate that undergraduate methods classes may be becoming more practical for beginning teachers, the 32.84% "least useful" response rate among the teachers who presumably have taken their methods courses within the past 10 years suggests that as many as one in three undergraduates continue to begin their careers feeling unprepared by their methods classes. One finding that bears further exploration is the suggestion that undergraduate music methods class be taught by professors who are also practitioners, within a classroom setting.

The respondents were very clear in their suggestions for courses in the ideal music education curriculum and in their recommendations for increased fieldwork for student teachers. These suggestions were supported and recognized as important by the President's Panel members at the November 2000 American Orff-Schulwerk Association National Conference in Rochester, New York, organized by AOSA president Linda Ahlstedt. It was also recognized at this discussion that influences or controlling bodies outside the teacher-preparation institutions (e.g., legislatures, state departments of education, NASM) play a large role in the development of teacher-preparation curricula, to the extent that the development of such "ideal curricula" are impeded by imposed requirements.

The extent to which these results can be generalized to the general population of music teachers is limited by the constraints presented at the beginning of this discussion. However, the results identify important areas of need in the undergraduate music curriculum. AOSA president Linda Ahlstedt has appointed a national committee of music educators, chaired by Marilyn Davidson, to create an "ideal" undergraduate music education curriculum in response to these identified needs. This will be presented at the 2001 National Conference of the AOSA President's Panel.

## Reference

Consortium of National Arts Education Associations. (1994). *National standards for arts education*. Reston, VA: MENC.

- [Table 1](#). Descriptive Statistics
- [Table 2](#). Perceived Preparation to Teach Specific Curricular Areas
- [Table 3](#). Percent Feeling Prepared to Teach by Experience and Curricular Categories
- [Table 4](#). Percentage of Respondents Obtaining Training in Specialized Pedagogies after the Bachelor's Degree
- [Table 5](#). Courses That Best and Least Prepared Respondents for Teaching Music
- [Table 6](#). Courses Suggested for an "Ideal Curriculum" for Undergraduate Music Education