

**Reducing Music Teacher Attrition Rates: How to Better Prepare Music Teachers to Stay in  
the Classroom**

**By**

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REDUCING MUSIC TEACHER ATTRITION RATES 2

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**Abstract**

This study is an investigation into why music teachers are leaving the profession and the possible connection between attrition and gaps in teacher training. Seven former music teachers were interviewed for this study. It was discovered that the largest gap in preservice music teacher training was in socio-emotional development of children and handling student trauma.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

### Introduction

Music teacher attrition has been an interest of mine ever since my dear friend quit the profession. I got to know her during my undergraduate studies and quickly recognized her potential to be a great music teacher. She excelled in all of her education classes, music classes, and student teaching. When she began her teaching career, she was an incredible music teacher with a lot of passion for the career. After two years, she decided not to return the following year. I was baffled as to why she did not want to continue. In conversations over those two years, I knew of some of the challenges that she had with the school district she was working for at the time, but her story did not add up. I knew there had to have been something bigger going on under the surface.

Then I started to see a similar pattern happen with my friends and colleagues working in the same school district as me. They were fantastic brand-new music teachers, many of whom I mentored, and then after a few years they left the profession. The pieces started to fall into place and really made me wonder what was happening that would cause so many wonderful teachers to quit and start a completely new career. I started to wonder if the cause of teachers quitting could have been prevented, if it was linked to their preservice teacher training, or if it truly just was not the right career choice for them. I began my own informal investigation by talking to new teachers and my teacher mentees about what things they did not feel prepared for and what things they learned in the beginning year of teaching that they wish they had learned while in college.

Although there are many things that can only be learned with classroom experience, it seemed that many of the things these young teachers felt unprepared for could have been prevented by better training. This led me to wonder if there might be a connection between

music teachers leaving the profession and their preservice teacher training. My thought was that if I could prove there was a gap in preservice teacher training to what teachers really needed to learn, this could lead to better prepared teachers and hopefully lead to teachers staying in the profession longer.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore more closely the reasons why music teachers are leaving the profession. Additionally, this thesis will be making connections between the reasons music teachers are leaving and their preservice teaching experience. The specific research question this thesis seeks to answer is: What is driving and what can be done about the current exodus of music teachers within the profession?

### **Importance of the Study**

The information in this thesis will be valuable to school administration, school districts, and higher education institutions. School administrators and school districts will benefit from this information so that they can better help their current teachers and give them professional development in the areas that teachers feel are lacking. Higher education institutions will benefit from this information so that they adjust or adapt their current preservice teacher courses to better train the next generation of teachers.

In Chapter One, I gave information on the purpose of this study, my research question, the importance of the study, and a definition of key terms. In Chapter Two I will provide my review of literature related to this study. I will review literature on teacher attrition, music teacher attrition, and gaps in music teacher preparation.

## **Chapter II: Review of Related Literature**

In the previous chapter, Chapter One, I introduced this study about music teacher attrition and gave some information about why I chose to study music teachers who leave the classroom. In this chapter, Chapter Two, I will review the literature related to my study of early resignation of music teachers. Many scholars agree that teacher attrition and music teacher attrition in particular, is a serious problem. I have organized my review of the literature into the following sections: Teacher Attrition, Music Teacher Attrition, and Gaps in Music Teacher Preparation. In the first section on teacher attrition in general, I will provide literature concerning how many teachers are leaving the profession at large and why. In the second section I will focus on music teacher attrition more specifically by providing scholarship about how many music teachers are leaving the classroom at an alarmingly early stage. In the third section, I will discuss research that has addressed what is missing from current preservice music preparation that might allay attrition.

### **Teacher Attrition**

In this section, I will present information from scholars who study early career teacher attrition (Kelly & Northrop, 2015; Clandinin, et al., 2014; Schaefer, 2013; Gray & Taie, 2015). I will then include writings from other scholars who talk about teacher attrition across the career spectrum (Syner & Maiden, 2012; Ingersoll, 2003; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). Moreover, I will include research from academics who discuss the extent of teacher attrition across the globe (Clandinin, et al. 2014; Schaefer, 2013; Buchanan et al., 2013; McKenzie & Santiago, 2005; Lindqvist, et al., 2014).

Gray and Taie (2015), who conducted the 2007-2008 Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Study, observed that 10% of beginning teachers who began in the 2007-2008 school year did not return the next year. They also observed that by year five, 17% of beginning teachers did not

return to the classroom. Interestingly, they saw no difference between beginning teachers who began teaching with a bachelor's degree versus a master's degree (Gray & Taie, 2015). Similarly, Clandinin, et al. (2014), a group of education scholars from Alberta, Canada, observed that a large number of teachers leave the classroom within the first five years. They discovered that 40% of beginning teachers leave the career within the first five years and 25% of education graduates did not enter the teaching professions.

Kelly and Northrop (2015), scholars from the University of Pittsburgh studied the relationship between early career teacher attrition and the type of university that the teachers received their undergraduate degrees. They observed that graduates of highly selective schools (a term used to denote universities with an acceptance rate of 20% or less) consistently experienced a less positive early career adjustment and had higher levels of attrition. Additionally, they observed that after three years of teaching, the less selective schools' graduates left the profession at a rate of 14% while highly selective schools' graduates left the profession at a rate of 20.5% (Kelly & Northrop, 2015). This is perhaps because, as Schaefer (2013), a scholar from the University of Alberta, Canada observed teachers leaving the profession early on in their careers could be experiencing a shift of identity from student to teacher.

Schaefer (2013), also suggested that diverse teacher education programs offer different philosophies which can make it difficult to generalize how teacher education affects new teachers. Buchanan et al., (2013) discovered isolation is a major factor in influencing teachers' decision to leave the classroom. They noted four different kinds of isolation that were negatively affecting early career teachers: physical, geographic, professional, and emotional isolation. Physical isolation refers to the location of the classroom and lack of other people nearby. Geographic isolation refers to the location of the school building. Professional isolation refers to a teacher who is the only one in the building teaching that subject. Lastly emotionally isolation



refers to teachers who are struggling within themselves and do not ask for help (Buchanan et al., 2013).

Madigan and Kim (2021), both scholars from the University of York describe how job satisfaction can impact the likelihood of a teacher staying in the profession or leaving. They discovered that teachers who perceive that their jobs meet their expectations are more likely to remain in the classroom. They also discovered that teachers who feel dissatisfied lack motivation, have less enjoyment, and are at higher risk of leaving the teaching profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Similarly, Ingersoll (2003), a scholar in teacher attrition, describes the most frequent reasons why teachers leave the teaching profession. He observed that many left due to dissatisfaction in their job and very few left due to retirement. Ingersoll also observed several factors that did not stand out as major reasons behind teacher turnover including large class sizes, intrusions on classroom time, and lack of planning time.

McKenzie and Santiago (2005), international teacher attrition scholars, discovered that teacher attrition affects some countries more severely than others. They have discovered that Italy, Japan, and Korea have less than three percent annual teacher attrition. While countries like Belgium, Sweden, Israel, and England have higher than six percent annual teacher attrition (McKenzie & Santiago, 2005). Meanwhile, Lindqvist, et al. (2014), from the Department of Educational Science in Sweden, observed that early career teacher attrition is a problem in Sweden. They discovered that after five years of teaching, only 72% of teachers remain in the classroom. They also found after a 15-year time period that number dropped down to 67% (Lindqvist, et al., 2014).

One impact of teacher turnover is the financial burden that teacher attrition has on the United States, according to research conducted by Syner and Maiden (2012). They have discovered that the United States spends anywhere from \$2 billion to over \$7.3 billion every year

to hire new teachers after others have left the profession. Beyond the economic loss, Sayner and Maiden (2012) suggest that when teachers resign, the knowledge and skills that the teachers take with them is a loss to the school and to the students. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2005), a group of scholars in education and teacher attrition, estimates that the yearly cost due to teacher attrition ranges from \$8.5 million in North Dakota to a half billion dollars in Texas. They believe that the single most crucial factor in determining student performance is in the quality of the teachers. Therefore, the Alliance for Excellent Education encourages efforts to be concentrated on developing and retaining high-quality teachers in every community and at every grade level.

In sum, scholars have talked about teacher attrition in terms of early career teach attrition, teacher attrition that stems across curriculum and across the globe. Teacher attrition is a topic of concern that is having a major impact not only in terms of the burdens on schools to find qualified teachers for their students but also creates a financial burden when teachers leave. Since music teachers are currently in short supply, particularly in the United States, in the next section I will present scholarship specifically concerning music teacher attrition.

### **Music Teacher Attrition**

In this section, I will present a brief overview of existing literature on music teacher attrition (Hancock, 2008; Hancock, 2009; Hamann 2002). I will also include writings from scholars who study working conditions of music teachers and their connection to music teacher attrition (Scheib, 2004; Gardner, 2010; Krueger, 2000; Lautzenheiser, 2001). Additionally, I will include research about the role of administrative support and their connection to music teacher attrition (Madsen, C. K., & Hancock, C. B., 2002; Krueger, 2000; Carver, et al., 2022). While I was able to locate enumerable articles that claimed they focused on music teacher attrition, most did not define it as I have for this study. I found that most studies on the topic lumped together all

manner of music teachers in transition (i.e., retirement, district change, location change, promotion to administration, parental leave), while I am focusing on music teacher attrition particularly in terms of people leaving the profession indefinitely.

Hancock (2009), determined that the music teacher turnover rate is 16% every school year. He observed that the top three reasons for teachers to leave included attending college, retirement and working in other fields. More than 28% of former music teachers returned to college, but it is worth noting that their degree or focus of study is unknown. He also observed 50% of former music teachers expressed the desire to return to the classroom compared to 38% of non-music teachers (Hancock 2009).

Hancock (2008), observed that certain characteristics put some music teachers at greater risk of attrition. He observed that music teachers under 30 were 3.06 times more likely to leave than those older than 30. He also observed that female music teachers' odds of attrition were 1.43 times higher than male teachers and minority teachers were 1.77 times higher than nonminority music teachers. Gardner (2010), also discovered that the gender of the music teacher and grades taught can impact their job satisfaction, finding that female music teachers are more likely to teach at an elementary or middle school whereas male music teacher are more likely to teach at a secondary level.

Additionally, string teachers are perhaps in the greatest demand within the music education profession. Hamann (2002), determined that in 1999-2000 school year, 24% of all string positions went unfilled, and in 2000-2001 school year, 43% of all string teaching positions went unfilled. He discovered that out of the positions that were filled, approximately 28 percent of the positions were filled by non-string teachers and only 60% of all string teaching positions were, at that time, full-time positions.

Scheib (2004), discussed working conditions as a reason for many teachers to seek other employment opportunities. He stated the burden of maintaining or increasing student enrollment in music classes, lack of teacher autonomy, and the feeling of being overworked were high priority issues plaguing many music teachers. Scheib determined that, “In many cases, enrollment figures are used to justify the very existence of the music program to administrators who may not view the importance of music instruction in the schools in the same way that music teachers do” (p. 55).

Gardner (2010), studied the areas in which music teachers are different than other teachers in the school and how that might affect their likelihood of remaining in the classroom. He found that music teachers had the highest percentage of teachers working either an itinerant or part-time position, with less than 83% having a full-time job. Music teachers often teach in multiple schools within a school district and at those schools have been found to receive less support than other teachers when working with students with special needs. Gardner believes that “music teacher job satisfaction and commitment may be negatively affected by the tribulations of working with such a variety of students without adequate support” (p.118).

Lautzenheiser (2001), interviewed several music educators who left the teaching profession within the first three years of their career to determine the cause of their leave. He found that several teachers did not feel prepared for the duties of teaching beyond just teaching students how to play music. Teachers did not have adequate training in communicating with parents, balancing a budget, or scheduling. As one teacher stated, “I didn’t know how to organize my time to get everything accomplished. The frustration was not with the music, but with the other aspects of my teaching load” (p. 39).

Both Madsen, C. K., & Hancock, C. B. (2002) and Krueger (2000), studied music teacher attrition within the first ten years and found administrative support to be a major contributor to

music teachers leaving the profession. Krueger believes administrative support, isolation, and discipline are some of the top reasons why music teachers leave the profession within the first ten years of their career. Carver (2022) echoes those statements about administrative support and feelings of isolation. Many music teachers stated they left or planned to leave largely in part due to lack of administrative support. Although Krueger's study showed a positive connection between music teachers and mentor or support systems, many music teachers stated they felt isolated and had no one to turn to if they had questions. Krueger states, "Isolation from other music teachers might negatively influence the desire to continue teaching music" (p. 24).

Madsen, C. K., & Hancock, C. B. (2002), found that out of a group of 122 music teachers, 34.4% of them left the career of music education. Many music teachers who left music education cited a lack of administrative support as the main factor in their decision. Madsen and Hancock state that the issue with administrative support lies within different understandings of the importance of music education, a perception of music as an extracurricular activity, and challenges to the content of instruction. Carver, et al. (2022), stressed the importance of administrative support in connection with job satisfaction.

In short, scholars have talked about music teacher attrition in terms of who is most likely to leave the profession, the specific working conditions, and how administrative support connects to music teacher attrition. Yet, a gap still exists in the literature regarding who is leaving the field of music education and why. This is the very gap I am trying to fill with this research.

### **Gaps in Music Teacher Preparation**

This section discusses literature concerning gaps that may exist in music teacher preparation that possibly contribute to attrition. I will first present literature on classroom instruction (Greher, 2011; Gilbert, 2016; Parks & Rawlings 2019; Culp et al., 2023; Reese et al., 2023). I will then present literature on classroom management (Forsythe, et al., 2007; Gee, 2022;

Roulston et al., 2005). Lastly, I will present literature on professional and parent communication (Lautzenheiser, 2001; Forsythe, et al., 2007; Mateos-Moreno, 2022; Bartolome, 2017).

Greher (2011), discusses the importance of having more training on technology and its use in the classroom while in the preservice stage of teaching. However, Greher does not specify any specific technology, but does states that “music education majors can have varied experiences with regard to technology instruction” (p.132). She also stated that, “much of the focus of music teacher education and music teacher licensure is still concentrated on performance-based practices, leaving little time in the music teacher preparation curriculum for music technology. Technology is often relegated to a subset of the general music curriculum” (p.134). She believes that technology should be integrated into the licensure track to ensure a well-rounded music teacher and musician.

Gilbert (2016), discusses the importance of implementing music technology courses into undergraduate music education programs. She states, “despite the increase of state and national policies that ask teachers to demonstrate that their students are developing as digital learners, collegiate music education programmes are alarmingly inconsistent when it comes to requiring coursework in twenty-first century areas such as instructional technology fit for a music classroom” (p.166). She believes that preservice teachers need to incorporate the technology that will be used in their lesson plans to indicate what adaptations or accommodations they will make. “Some training in instructional technology is essential in order to best equip pre-service teachers to enter the workforce with the skills and tools necessary to apply appropriate technologic resources in their own classrooms” (p. 170).

Parks & Rawlings (2019), researched the area of assessment training in preservice music teachers. They discovered that over 42% of respondents in the study reported concerns related to

how music teacher educator's sequence assessment design. Respondents believed that programs should develop a pedagogy for assessment within music education coursework.

Culp, et al. (2023), researched preservice music teacher programs and their preparation in regard to P-12 learners' socioemotional development (SED). Their research showed that over 67% of undergraduate programs did not require any courses to be taken on understanding socioemotional development. About half of the respondents in the study reported no form of systematic integration of P-12 learners' SED in their programs, with only 38% responding that their undergraduate program did include integration.

Reese, et al. (2023), researched teacher preparation for elementary general music teachers to see what areas they felt underprepared. They discovered that the areas in which preservice teachers felt most prepared were planning lessons, teaching students to sing a song, teaching students to perform a steady beat and teaching students to perform rhythms. The participants in this study felt least prepared with general knowledge of child development, meeting the needs of special learners, meeting the needs of learners with various learning styles or needs and culturally diverse backgrounds and general knowledge of musical development. Out of all participants in this study, only 63% believed their courses had adequately prepared them for teaching in the classroom.

Forseythe, et al. (2007), researched the standards and procedures described in *The National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) Handbook* and perspectives about teaching educators and preservice music teachers. The NASM Handbook contains descriptions of required experiences and music teaching competencies that preservice music teaching programs must be designed to develop. Several of the teacher education faculty involved in this study felt that there were some areas that were lacking in the training of preservice music teachers. The areas that were lacking were: interpersonal relationships, leadership ability, delivery of instruction,

communication with parents and the community, rapport with students, and classroom management (Forseythe, et al., 2007).

Gee (2022) similarly researched classroom management preparation for preservice elementary general music teachers. She discovered that out of a pool of 274 participants, over 80% reported that their music teacher education program did not offer any courses on classroom management. Additionally, she reported that the most common source of classroom management training was through the mentoring of other licensed teachers, 44% or through supervised fieldwork, 41.1%.

Roulston, et al. (2005), echoed similar statements to Reese, et al., with many participants saying they did not feel prepared with classroom management. They also noted that many teachers reported that they would have liked more hands-on teaching experiences in authentic settings during their pre-service teaching preparation (Roulston, et al., 2005). Additionally, they discovered that choral teachers specifically wanted more training on choosing repertoire for diverse vocal configurations which elementary teachers stated they wanted more training on pedagogical strategies for teaching musical concepts.

Likewise, Lautzenheiser (2001) interviewed several music educators who left the teaching profession within the first three years of their career to determine the cause of their leave. He found that several teachers did not feel prepared for the duties of teaching beyond just teaching students how to play music. Teachers did not have adequate training in communicating with parents, balancing a budget, or scheduling. One teacher even stated, "I didn't know how to organize my time to get everything accomplished. The frustration was not with the music, but with the other aspects of my teaching load" (Lautzenheiser, 2001, p. 39). Lautzenheiser believes that if teachers are not prepared accordingly, the communication challenges will only add to their feelings of personal disappointment and lack of accomplishment. Additionally, he believes that



teacher educators need to focus on developing effective people skills as part of basic teacher preparation. Bartolone (2017) echoes this concern that there needs to be more training on interpersonal interactions, professional interactions, and parent communication.

Mateos-Moreno (2022), explores the concerns that pre-service music teachers have on their future position. He discovered that many preservice music teachers were concerned about the negative appraisals regarding the profession of music teacher. Respondents' own motivation towards music was also a concern because they were unsure about whether their motivation was enough to keep their interest in teaching music. Respondents also noted that they felt very intimidated by parent communication.

Albert (2023), researched the development of preservice music educator's occupational identity development. He discovered that the culture of the music education program and its communities of practice had a significant impact on the teacher identity of the preservice music educators. Due to the culture of the program, several preservice teachers noted that their original intention of teaching music solely through the performance-based ensembles (p. 276). According to Albert,

music teacher educators should consider how music teacher education programmes are designed and taught, as well as how their interactions with students can have a substantial influence on the culture of the music education programme and on students' emerging teacher identity development... Music teacher educators may wish to undertake a critical reflection of the culture and communities of practice of their music education programme to determine how one's teacher identity development is supported, or perhaps, undermined (p. 277).

In essence, music teacher attrition is related to identity development and pre-service music teacher education. And, scholars have discussed gaps in pre-service music teacher

education in terms of classroom instruction, classroom management, professional communication, and parent communication - all of which could be contributing to music teacher attrition.

Moreover, Chapter Two includes scholarship concerning Teacher Attrition, Music Teacher Attrition, and Gaps in Music Teacher Preparation. To better understand early career music teacher attrition as discussed by these scholars, it is important to also conduct research about what former music teachers say about why they left the classroom after a few short years. The literature included here forms the foundation of this research because it helps to better examine my research question: What is driving and what can be done about the current exodus of music teachers leaving the profession. Next, in Chapter Three, I will describe the methodology I used to address my research question, my study's design, and the procedures I used for analysis.

### **Chapter III: Design and Methodology**

In the previous chapter, I reviewed the preexisting literature about teacher attrition, early career music teacher attrition, and the gaps in music teacher preparation. In Chapter Three, I will explain how I designed this research project and share my methods of analysis. As stated previously, the research question guiding this study is: What is driving and what can be done about the current exodus of music teachers within the first ten years of their careers? For the ease and understanding of the reader, I have broken down this chapter into the following subsections: Process, Participants, Qualitative Research, Data Collection and Analysis.

#### **Process**

My process for conducting this research began with trying to understand why so many music educators are leaving the profession and what is the connection between this phenomenon and the process of preservice music teacher preparation. I knew I wanted to interview using open ended questions about the experiences of former music teachers during their first few years of teaching. I also wanted to understand what areas they felt they were not prepared for when entering the classroom. I reached out via email to some former colleagues of mine who left the teaching profession. Those former colleagues also shared contact information with me of other music teachers who left the field of music teaching. Seven (7) former music teachers accepted my proposal and signed the Informed Consent form (see Appendix B). I interviewed each participant once, video recorded the interviews, and transcribed each of the recordings for analysis.

## **Participants**

My participants were selected using purposive, snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was necessary to identify participants who were former music teachers and who left music teaching. In addition, because I am a current music teacher, I used snowball sampling to increase the number of participants in the study by spreading the word within my professional network. Sampling methods are intended to select a more narrow selection from the greater population for a research study. As Turner (2020) states, “In the vast majority of research endeavors, the participation of an entire population of interest is not possible, so a smaller group is relied upon for data collection”. Since I was trying to understand early career music teacher attrition, I used this type of sampling typical for qualitative research using interviews (Naderifar, et al., 2017).

In order to help answer questions about early career music teacher attrition, I needed former music teachers, and in addition, these teachers needed to have left the music teaching profession rather straightforward and I selected seven (7) participants who most accurately fit the above criteria. I reached out to these former music teachers via email (see Appendix C). After they received an Informed Consent form (see Appendix B) via email and had one week to review it and ask questions, all seven signed the form, consenting to interviews. It should be noted that four participants were female, and three were male. In addition, participants ranged in age from their mid-twenties to early forties. Their former teaching positions represent a mix of band, choral, and orchestral ensemble direction. No general music teachers were included in this study because none volunteered for the study.

## **Qualitative Research**

This study uses Qualitative Research. Qualitative research focuses mainly on providing “in-depth insights and understanding[s] of real-world problems” (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). By using qualitative research, I was able to collect data regarding why some former music teachers

decided to leave the music classroom and pursue a different career. Qualitative research allowed for an in-depth analysis of the personal reasons why many former music teachers left the profession. Conducting a qualitative study allowed me to focus in on individuals' insight and justifications for why they left the profession and their perceived level of preparation when beginning their music teaching career. I was able to collect this data through conducting interviews wherein I asked mostly open-ended questions.

### **Data Collection**

My research interest required me to select former music teachers who have left the music teaching profession entirely. These participants were interviewed via zoom about their experiences as a music teacher. Participants were asked open-ended questions about the challenges they faced while teaching music and what areas they felt least prepared for when entering the classroom. Participants were also asked about the reason why they left music education, and about what they are doing currently.

### **Approach Analysis**

My data analysis plan began with transcribing all seven interviews, which I then went through to code for themes using *in vivo* coding. *In vivo* coding means "A form of qualitative data analysis that places emphasis on the actual spoken words of the participants" (Manning 2017). I first went through all the transcripts line by line and highlighted words and phrases that signified important ideas. I then identified 36 subthemes from these excerpts and then grouped the resulting subthemes into four overarching themes based on commonalities and connections between ideas brought forth by different participants.

Moreover, in Chapter Three I described how I interviewed former music teachers and used *in vivo* coding to find common themes. I explained the study's process, its participants, and

how they were selected, methodology and data analysis. In Chapter Four I will report my findings.

## **Chapter IV: Findings**

In the previous three chapters I introduced this study about music teacher attrition, a review of literature related to music teacher attrition, and a description of the methodology and my approach to analysis. Here, in Chapter Four, I will report the findings from the data. As described in Chapter Three, I interviewed seven people who left the teaching profession and coded the transcripts to analyze why these individuals left the teaching profession. In order to preserve participant anonymity while also maintaining the narrative of participants' voices, I have assigned pseudonyms to all seven participants that bear no resemblance of their real names or identities. Below, I will report on what participants shared that were nuanced factors that played into their perception of the music teaching profession, grouped into the following four themes: personal, classroom, school, and teacher training related factors.

### **Personal Factors**

Participants ranged in teaching length from two years to 16 years. Three of the participants (whom I will call Sophie, Noah, and Jordyn) only taught music for two years before leaving the profession. Another three (whom I will refer to as Emily, Miguel, and Mark) remained in the classroom for a maximum of nine years and only one (whom I reference as Bethany) taught for 16 years. Four out of the seven participants explained how being a music teacher felt like a selfless job or that there were personal sacrifices required with the job. For some, that sacrifice was in the time required outside of school, while others stated it was their energy and soul that was being sacrificed. Mark and Jordyn, in particular, talked at length about these sacrifices and the negative effect they had on their family lives.

Loss of passion for music or teaching music was mentioned on twelve separate occasions by four of the participants. Miguel and Bethany described losing their passion for music in the last year or two of them teaching. While Isaiah and Jordyn described it as beginning to lose their

passion as early as during their undergraduate studies. Similarly, five out of the seven participants described a feeling of burn out and exhaustion on ten separate occasions. These five participants also described stress from the job having a negative impact on them ten separate times. Miguel talked at length about their level of exhaustion and how he had very little energy left at the end of the day for himself to make dinner or simply to stay awake.

The mental and physical toll of teaching music was talked about by all but one participant and was mentioned over thirty times. Sophie and Emily mentioned often having feelings of self-doubt. Mark talked at length about battling depression. Jordyn and Sophie stated that their eating habits were affected by the job and caused them to eat very little or nothing at all while at work. Sophie talked at length about struggling with her mental and physical health which led her to quit teaching and get professional medical care.

Salary was mentioned the most with five people discussing it thirty-three times. All five participants who discussed salary said they did not earn enough money to support their families and that the salary did not match the hours of work they were putting in for the job. Mark talked about needing three different jobs just to afford childcare for his son. He would drive for *Uber* before school, teach a full day of music classes, drive for Uber again, and then perform piano concerts in the evening. Jordyn said that the additional hours, outside of contract hours, that the school expected her to work had her earning \$13 an hour.

### **Classroom Factors**

The lack of resources in the classroom was discussed at length by Miguel, Emily, and Sophie. They expressed the challenges they faced with not having the resources required to teach the class such as functional instruments. Miguel described opening cello cases before his first day with students and every cello came out in multiple pieces. Sophie discussed having only a



few instruments for students to use because all the other instruments were broken, and the school was not going to fix them.

Working with difficult parents was brought up by three participants five separate times. They discussed the challenge of learning how to reply to an angry parent email and learning how to have a phone conversation with an angry parent. In addition to communicating with parents when they are upset, participants also talked about the challenge of working with a student's parent who is not supportive of their child being in music or is not interested in helping their child with their education.

Lack of respect was mentioned on nine separate occasions by Mark and Sophie. Both said the lack of respect was from students and colleagues, as well as administrators. Sophie discussed in detail the disrespect she experienced while working at multiple different schools. Mark described disrespect that he encountered on his first day of school, stating that a student told him they would never follow his instructions simply because he was the assistant director and not the head director.

High expectations and a feeling of having to achieve success were mentioned eight times by three participants. Noah described it as having to balance rigor and fun. Additionally, Noah and Miguel explained it as a pressure to perform well and have their students succeed at competitions or else it meant a negative reflection of their teaching. Both of whom mentioned that the success of their students was imperative if they wanted to find a different job because winning competitions indicated being a strong teacher. Bethany described feeling pressure to achieve success after she took over a program from a long-standing director.

The physical location of the classroom as well as the class schedule was mentioned 13 times by four participants. Isolation from the rest of the school was mentioned twice by Sophie. Additionally, Sophie discussed being forced to teach in a closet or in the hallway and having to

teach at ten different schools, six schools a day. Jordyn and Mark talked about having to teach outside of school hours and a full day of classes.

Managing poor student behavior and classroom management was discussed by four out of the seven participants and was mentioned 26 times. Noah described a fight that broke out during the first day of music class. While Miguel described an incident during the first week of teaching where he walked into the bathroom to find students beating up a student who was left bleeding on the floor. Mark and Noah explained that cell phones were a frequent problem with student behavior in the classroom, was difficult to enforce, and was met with hostility from the students and sometimes parents. Mark also explained that the student behavior was so poor in his classroom that it required a police officer to be present every day and even still, students would misbehave.

Handling students' emotional baggage was discussed by five out of the seven participants and was discussed in length 30 times. All five of these participants talked about the challenge of knowing what to do when students open up to you and unload their trauma onto you. They also talked about not knowing how to cope with knowing about their students' trauma and the mental toll it can take on a person. All five participants who talked about handling students' emotional baggage stated that it is a large part of the job that they felt completely unprepared for.

### **School Factors**

Diversity was a challenge that Bethany mentioned. Bethany is a black female who took over a long-standing orchestra program. The program's previous three teachers were white males. She described how challenging it was to get students and parents to buy into her new program which she believed to be due to her gender and race. School culture and adjusting to the school culture was mentioned three separate times by Noah who said he did not feel like he fit into the school's culture and that he did not understand fully the school's culture. He described

feeling lonely and left out at teacher gatherings because he did not understand the culture of the school like the other teachers did.

Jordyn discussed school safety at great length. The area that she worked in had a high population of people who owned guns. She expressed great concern for those weapons entering the school and the risk of a school shooting. And yet Sophie mentioned a feeling of having no control over situations in the school. She talked about how she had no control over her own schedule, rules, or the subjects in which she taught. This feeling of having no control in the workplace led her to find control in her life elsewhere which manifested into an eating disorder.

Three participants talked about the challenges of working with difficult colleagues. Colleagues who had a cold demeanor were mentioned by Sophie. Jordyn, who was an assistant director, described her head director colleague and mentor as uninterested in helping her learn and did not care what she did. Mark shared examples of times his colleague would frequently undermine him while in class and in front of students.

Having to advocate for yourself and your program was a concern mentioned by Bethany, Sophie, and Miguel, six times. Bethany described needing to confront guidance counselors and coaches to let students stay in their class. Sophie described having to advocate for her program to other colleagues and administration and expressed the challenge of doing that without harming the relationship.

A breakdown in communication throughout the school was mentioned by three participants, nine times. Sophie and Emily discussed how many things were not told to them by the school or the administration. Emily mentioned not being told how much of a budget she had to use or how to order a bus for a field trip. Sophie mentioned that colleagues would not notify her about class field trips and would not know when students would be absent from class.

Six out of the seven participants talked about the school requiring them to spend their own money and time outside of contract hours. Sophie described instruments that did not work or were missing mouthpieces. The school did not want to fix them but required the students to use school instruments. She had to purchase a mouthpiece for that instrument with their own money to have a working instrument for a student. Jordyn described needing to stay after school until late at night multiple times a week to supervise private lessons that were happening in the classroom. She was expected to provide the space for the lessons to take place but was not paid for her time supervising the lessons.

Five participants mentioned twelve times having to shoulder excessive work. Miguel described how the school had a shortage of substitute teachers, so when a teacher was absent, he was asked to cover that class without getting additional pay. Additionally, Miguel and Mark described situations where students were put in their music class on purpose because they could not behave well in other classes, or the other teachers did not want them in their classroom.

Having a support network was discussed by all seven participants. While all had at least one person they considered to be part of their support network, two felt it was not enough. Sophie said her only support network was a teacher who only worked part time and was often not there. Mark said they had a mentor who was their support network, but they only saw them one to two times per year.

The most frequently discussed school related factor was lack of support and lack of respect from administrators. This topic was discussed at length by five of the seven participants and was mentioned 46 times. Miguel described being scolded by the principal for asking for help and guidance. On another occasion, this principal refused him a mental health day because she did not believe in taking days off for mental health. Mark described a situation with student behavior that required the principal to get involved. The principal did not help or support the

teacher and told him to avoid talking to that student in class to reduce the possibility of another negative interaction.

### **Teacher Training Factors**

Although the seven participants spoke extensively about the challenges of being a music teacher, it is worth noting that not everything that was discussed was negative. The comfort and enjoyment of teaching the content was discussed five times. Various rewards of the job were mentioned 17 times and five participants said they miss teaching or miss their former students. A poor experience during their undergraduate studies was mentioned 14 times by three participants. Emily explained how the music education professor had very little personal teaching experience and could not adequately prepare the students for student teaching and beyond. Jordyn said that there was a lot of toxicity in the band department at her university. She stated that during rehearsals, the director would work on perfecting one note for one to two hours. Additionally, the band director would publicly shame students for asking questions and belittle students in front of peers.

All seven participants talked in great length about the gaps in teacher preparation and what areas they felt they were not adequately prepared in before beginning teaching. Gaps in teacher preparation were mentioned 73 times. Although the participants were not sure if being better prepared would have made a difference in their decision to leave, they all agreed that it would have at least made teaching less stressful in the beginning years and more enjoyable. Below are the areas discussed as gaps in teacher preparation.

#### *Building a Program*

Building a program was mentioned from Bethany and Miguel. Bethany discussed the challenge of taking over a program from someone who was there for a long time and wanting to start her own program that was different than her predecessor. Miguel discussed how difficult it

is to go from student teaching at school with a well-established program and going to a school that is just starting a program, or the current program is in disarray.

### *Budgets and Administrative Tasks*

Budgeting for your program and administrative tasks was mentioned five times by three participants. Emily expressed not being trained at all about how to plan for a trip such as ordering buses or how to budget for her program. While Bethany mentioned receiving no training on finances, budgets, or a booster's program. She also said she felt so unprepared for the job's finances that she wished there were an entire college class dedicated to finances and budgets.

### *Communication*

Communication was mentioned seven times by four participants. Communicating with parents, especially when they are upset, was mentioned twice by Noah that he wanted to know how to handle difficult parent situations. Mentioned five times by Sophie, Bethany and Mark was that they would have benefited from knowing how to communicate with administration, coaches, and counselors in the school. They said it was challenging having to learn how to advocate for yourself and your program without damaging the relationship.

### *Classroom Teaching*

Five participants mentioned nine times the need for more training on running a successful classroom. Emily expressed the challenge of meeting the students where they are at in their learning and not comparing the level that the students are at with another school. Learning how to teach in different styles to address different learning styles of students and make accommodations for students with learning difficulties or a 504 plan was discussed twice by Jordyn. Bethany expressed twice a need for more training on teaching beginner and intermediate

students. How to structure a successful class and have effective teaching methods was mentioned four times by Mark, Jordyn, and Sophie.

### *Student Teaching*

Student teaching experiences were described at length by five of the participants, ten times. It is worth noting that Mark got his teaching license through the alternative teacher certification program which did not require him to do student teaching or any classroom observations. He said that he wishes he could have done student teaching, for that would have shown him what teaching really looks like and may have changed his entire career path. Both Miguel and Emily described their student teaching experience as being at top performing schools with well-established programs and rarely in title one schools. They both described that it was a fantastic experience but did not prepare them for the challenge of growing your own program or working in a title one school with little funding or support. They both expressed a desire to see more future teachers doing student teaching in title one schools.

### *Classroom Management*

Four participants discussed classroom management and student behavior fourteen times. Noah described not having any training during his undergraduate studies in classroom management. He felt that training in this area would have been helpful for him. Emily and Mark explained not having received training on what to do when students misbehave or refuse to do work. Miguel talked at length about having to learn on his own how to react appropriately to students misbehaving. He talked about learning the importance of learning when not to react and how he did not receive any training in that.

### *Needs of the Child and Student Trauma*

The need for having more training in the needs of the child and student trauma was discussed at great length 26 times by five of the seven participants. These five participants said

they were only trained in the class's content, not in how to teach it to children. Miguel talked at length about wishing he had taken a class on child psychology and child development.

Additionally, Miguel, Sophie, Emily, and Bethany said they had no formal training in the social emotional needs of students. Bethany talked about teaching as being very emotional at times and that teachers wear many hats to accommodate the needs of the students but that it is not discussed as much as it should be in undergraduate studies.

Emily and Miguel talked about how important it is for teachers to build relationships with students, so they feel safe talking to a teacher about difficult topics such as trauma. Miguel described at great length different situations where students came to him to share a trauma that they were dealing with in their life. He, Emily, and Sophie said they had no training on what to do in these situations, and it took years to become more comfortable with those conversations. Although the conversations became easier with time, they also said that they really struggled with coping with the information and not letting it affect them personally. For Miguel, he said that it was so hard for him to manage hearing about the traumas of his students, that he ended up quitting the field of teaching. For Sophie, the inability to cope with student trauma plus a culmination of other factors led her to quit teaching as well.

In this chapter, I shared narratives of teachers who left the field and grouped common themes from former music teachers' experiences that they shared with me. These themes were Personal Factors, Classroom Factors, School Factors, and Teacher Training Factors. In the next chapter, I will discuss these themes and their implications for the field of music education.



## **Chapter V: Discussion and Implications**

In this chapter I will discuss the implications of my findings from Chapter Four. Also, I will draw conclusions from my findings in Chapter Four in relation to my literature review in Chapter Two. Lastly, I will discuss the implications these findings have on the field of music education.

### **Personal Factors**

Something that cannot be taught is passion for teaching music. Jordyn and Noah talked at length about the feeling of losing their passion for music and teaching music. They both felt that their passion was dwindling starting during their undergraduate studies. Both of whom only taught for two years before changing careers. This coincides with the research done by Mateos-Moreno (2022) whom I mentioned in Chapter Two. They said motivation towards music was a concern because participants did not know if their passion and interest in music would be enough to keep them engaged in the career long term.

Mental and physical health, although not mentioned in any of the literature in Chapter Two, was a common topic often discussed by many of the participants. Miguel and Sophie described an extreme feeling of exhaustion when they got home from work that often resulted in them falling asleep sometimes before they could even make dinner. Jordyn talked about the stress of the job causing her to have an eating disorder causing her to often go through days of work without eating anything. Mark talked about being clinically depressed due to the stress of his job. Sophie also suffered with her mental health, which also influenced her physical health. She said it “manifested itself into only taking in 600 calories a day and then going hiking on the weekends. I had to count everything, I had to check my steps, I had to go hiking for at least 5 miles. It was like this control thing that I felt like I didn't have in my work life, not even being

able to teach really what I wanted.” Sophie ended up quitting teaching and checked herself into the hospital where she required months of extensive care and recovery.

Stress was a major contributing factor to the mental health issues of Sophie, Mark, and Jordyn. Emily said she believes one of the major factors of why she left the career was due to stress. She said the stress from her job made her physically exhausted and she did not feel like she had any time to decompress during the week. By the time summer break rolled around, she said she was so tired she “wanted to sleep for three weeks.” Sophie echoed those statements that she too was so exhausted, caused by stress, that she slept all summer. Mark discussed a conversation with his father and brother, who are both doctors, and he seemed more stressed from his job as a music teacher than his family members who were doctors. In reference to his father, he said “he is literally curing people and saving lives and I’m making music. And I’m the one who is stressed out.”

This stress inevitably has a negative effect on family life. Mark said that much of the work stress carried over to home. He recalled a conversation he had with his then six-year-old son. Mark’s son said, “Daddy, are you angry again today?” Mark said, “That’s what he sees from his father. I’m done. That was March last year when I said I will not do this ever again. I’m done with teaching.”

Salary was also frequently discussed as a reason for leaving the career. Mark had to work two other jobs outside of teaching to financially support his wife and two kids. He said, “My last year teaching, I was able to make ends meet by driving Uber from 4am to 6am. At 6am I would stop driving Uber. I would go teach 7am to 4pm. I would leave teaching and would Uber 4pm to 6pm and I would play a show on the piano 7pm to 10pm. I did that for a full six months to try to make ends meet for my family.” Jordyn explained, “You’re there after hours a lot and you’re there before school, after school, on the weekends. I calculated it out and I was only making \$13

an hour...I could be making more at Bucee's and I could see my family more...The lack of pay just made it really hard to continue.”

For many of the participants, all of these things added up and they felt like they were in some ways sacrificing themselves for the job. They would push themselves to exhaustion for their students or their program. They would put the needs of others before themselves but at what cost? Noah described it saying “It’s a thankless job that you have to get into to be of service and make sacrifices. I know that over time, those sacrifices, and those things will weigh on people.” Bethany said, “I invested in my students more than I invested in myself.” Mark referred to it as, “soul sucking.” This feeling of sacrificing oneself for a job that you are dissatisfied with is not sustainable and will not lead to teachers staying in the classroom for decades. Ingersoll (2003) even discussed that the most frequent reason teachers leave the fields is due to dissatisfaction in their job.

### **Classroom Factors**

For Miguel and Sophie, the lack of resources, particularly with their classroom instruments, was a big concern. Sophie had to purchase multiple parts for instruments such as different mouthpieces for a euphonium because the instruments were missing parts and not playable. Her school did not provide her with any budget yet required students to use the school instruments. She felt that her only option was to spend her own money to fix the instruments. Miguel also walked into a job that had instruments in severe need of repair. He said, “I went to the first cello case, and I unzipped it up and it came out in pieces. All the instruments were in disrepair and none of the kids could afford instruments.” Luckily for Miguel, a local music store was kind enough to donate some instruments to replace the broken cellos. For both Sophie and Miguel, the classroom they walked into did not set the students or the teachers up for success. Having materials and instruments in working order is an essential part of a music class. Sadly,

not just the teachers were impacted by this, but also the students. Students who cannot afford to rent or purchase an instrument rely on the school to provide an instrument and experience something they may not have ever had the opportunity to explore. However, instruments out of service are instruments that students cannot play on or learn from.

Additionally, the physical location of the classroom can pose a challenge. Many times, teachers are placed at the end of the building to avoid the noise from the classroom becoming a distraction to other classes. However, when teachers are put so far away from other teachers, one can experience a feeling of isolation. As Kreuger (2000) discovered, many music teachers stated they felt isolated and had no one to turn to if they had questions.

Other times, as Sophie experienced, teachers may not even have a designated classroom or may need to teach in a closet. Sophie also had to teach at multiple schools per week, teaching at ten different schools, six schools a day. Although working at this many schools seems extreme, the idea of music teachers teaching at multiple different schools is not uncommon. As previously discussed in Chapter Two, Gardner (2010) found that music teachers had the highest percentage of teachers working either an itinerant or part-time position, with less than 83% having a full-time job.

Although the physical location of the music classroom may not seem substantial at first thought, it can make a difference in the longevity of that teacher's career or time at that school. From the interviews that I conducted all participants shared the idea of wanting to feel supported and part of a community. It is very hard to feel like you are part of the community if your room is isolated from the rest of the school, not teaching in a space designed for music classes, or if you are working at multiple different schools. It is understandable as to why music classes are often away from academic classes, but schools should then find ways to build the community within the school, so all teachers feel like they belong and are cared for and supported.

Despite many teachers feeling isolated, many still feel pressure to achieve high expectations or feel pressure to be an extraordinarily successful teacher with high performing groups. Four participants described how they felt under pressure to achieve high standards. Bethany said her pressure stemmed from the legacy of her predecessor. Miguel and Noah talked about the pressure for their students to perform well because they felt that reflected their teaching and how good of a teacher they were. Noah said, “I was really nervous that some of the groups wouldn't do well. And then what would people think about me as a teacher.”

One highly talked about topic under was the lack of respect from students and poor student behavior. Four participants talked at great length about the challenges they encountered with students in the classroom. Miguel said, “We had a list of kids that were runners. If you saw in the hallway, you had to like escort them back to the classroom because they would just walk out the front door and run and disappear.” For Mark, on his first day as a choir teacher, a student told him, “You're a man doing a woman's job. I'll never listen to you or respect you.” Noah's first day involved a fight in his classroom and Miguel witnessed a violent beating in the first week of him starting his career. Mark's class was especially difficult when classroom behaviors were not enforced by the school and the class began to spiral out of control to the point of requiring a police officer to be present. He said, “The last year teaching, I had to teach with a police officer standing over my shoulder, standing right there behind me as I taught, just to hope the kids would behave the right way so I could teach.”

Trying to teach in this kind of environment, and in the case of Mark and Miguel, without strong administrative support, is extremely difficult. Not only is it difficult to teach when students are being disrespectful, but it creates a negative learning environment for others and begins to take a mental toll on the teacher. In the times when students are being disrespectful and parents need to be contacted, it is always the hope that the family is supportive and helpful,

however that is not always the case. Unfortunately, not all parents are supportive, and some do not wish to be involved in their child's school life.

Many times, the teacher becomes the primary supporter of the student, especially when parents are not involved in their child's academics. As Bethany said, "You are so many people, a counselor, you're a cheerleader, you're a provider emotionally, financially, sometimes for your students you are everything to your student." Music students often form a strong relationship with their music teacher simply because it is a class that they chose and is a class they enjoy. Music teachers often work hard on getting to know their students on a personal level because it will help build the strength of their program. However, when they do build a strong relationship with students, they often become trusted adults that students feel comfortable going to when they need help. It is wonderful being a trusted adult that students can rely on, but it also means that students may share a trauma that they are dealing with or share something personal with the teacher that they have never told anyone before. Hearing the traumas that students are dealing with, knowing how to respond in those conversations, and knowing how to personally handle knowing of a student's trauma, were frequently talked about.

Sophie discussed the terrible feeling of having to call Child Protective Services to report a case of child abuse and then being called into court to testify in the case. Miguel said, "I had a girl tell me she got raped by a family member. And I was the first person she told like outside of her family finding out. And I became a teacher to be a fixer. I became a teacher to help to shape and affect things. And I have a really hard time leaving those things at school." Emily said,

I'm not a therapist, I'm not a counselor like I have my degree in teaching, not psychology. And it's just like but nobody, you know, nobody warns you about that. But it turns out to be such a huge part of the job. I think it's the majority of the job, to be honest with you.

Like teaching a subject is secondary and you can't do any of the subject teaching unless everything social and emotionally is taken care of.

Emily's statement about not being told about this aspect of being a teacher matches what Culp (2023) discovered that 67% of undergraduate programs do not require any courses on socioemotional development. This statement was also echoed by four other participants. With this being an incredibly important part of the job, it is shocking to know that so few teachers are getting the proper training that they need.

### **School Factors**

A school's culture can have a significant impact on the teachers who work there. Bethany noticed that in all the three schools that she worked for, there was very little diversity or minority teachers. For Bethany, who is a black female, at all three schools that she taught at, the previous orchestra directors had only ever been white males. She said that taking over a program that has only ever been run by white males was, "a lot of pressure." The parents of her orchestra program were not kind to her coming into the school and would often try to belittle her. Noah also had a tough time adjusting to the school culture because he was not born in the same state that he taught. He said that teachers at not just his school but the entire surrounding area, were close knit to teachers from that state. For Noah, he did not feel like a part of the school community and said he just felt like he was "floating around."

For Jordyn, safety was a big concern that made her uncomfortable in the school she taught. Jordyn taught in a state that had legalized conceal carry laws and carrying a weapon was a common sight in her community. With the popularity of firearms and an increase in nationwide school shootings, she was worried that her school would have a shooting. She said, "I was always afraid of the access to guns in this area and what that was like in the public-school

setting. It's something that not a lot of people like to talk about, but that was something that terrified both my husband and I.”

In addition to not feeling safe, Jordyn also had to deal with some difficult colleagues. When she began at the school as an assistant band director, she was under the supervision of the head band director who was also her assigned mentor at the school. She was hoping that he would be a great resource to answer her questions, help mentor her to become a better teacher, and be her support system. Unfortunately, the reality was that he did not want to be involved in her teaching or mentoring her at all. When she asked him questions, he would tell her to ask someone else. He also gave her no help when selecting music for a major competition within the district but then after the competition, she was criticized for her music selections by the district music director. Mark also worked with difficult colleagues and had no support system for when he needed something. Mark had multiple difficult colleagues, particularly from the head choir director, who was his teaching partner, and school administration. He said the head director would often “pull the rug out” from under him in front of students. The school's administration was also challenging to work with and did not support teachers in times of need, such as with disciplining students.

Working with difficult colleagues also involved the guidance counselors and coaches for Bethany and Miguel. Bethany said she would often have problems with her school coaches who would force students to skip required rehearsals and concerts. Miguel and mark had difficult guidance counselors who would add students into his class without those students wanting to be in that class. Bethany said she would need to talk to the guidance counselors often because they kept trying to pull kids out of her class to join sports. Bethany said that with both the coaches and the counselors she felt like she needed to “fight for my students to stay.” This need for advocating for yourself and your program is not uncommon for music teachers but very unusual



for other content areas. When you consider the fact that for many music teachers, their job's stability is based solely on enrollment numbers. It can be extremely difficult to maintain student enrollment as is without factoring in other staff members who are actively trying to reduce the number of students in the program.

In order to grow your music program or simply have a successful music class, communication within the school and between colleagues is essential. In the example of Miguel, he was not told that most of the students in his class were not signed up for the class and they were just put there. For Mark, he had students put in his class because other teachers did not want them in their class, yet this was never discussed with him. This breakdown in communication can quickly chip away at a person's trust and make them lose faith in the people they work with.

Requiring teachers to have excessive workloads during contract hours, expecting teachers to spend hours outside of contract hours, and also expecting teachers to spend their own money on materials for class are additional reasons that teachers begin to lose faith in their school. Sophie's school required her to be on four school committees which met before school, after school, and during her planning period. If she did not participate in at least four committees, the school would punish her on her yearly evaluation.

Emily said she was working on average 65 hours a week due to needing to work outside of her contract hours. Miguel was required to cover classes for absent teachers during his planning period but was not compensated for giving up his planning period to teach a different class. Sophie had to spend her own money to repair broken instruments and purchase mouthpieces for the school instruments when the school said they would not pay for the maintenance of the instruments. Jordyn was expected to supervise private lessons after school until 8:30pm without getting compensated for those after school hours. On days that she was not

supervising lessons, she was still working an average of 12 hours a day but was not being paid for that many hours.

All these school-related factors boil down to one primary theme: the administration lacks support and respect. Many times, the adults who are in administrative roles simply do not understand what makes a music class different than a core academic class. Jordyn talked extensively about how challenging it was for her when the administration would require teachers to implement something new in their classroom or in their teaching that they learned during a professional development seminar. She said,

The biggest challenge was figuring out how to connect my toolbox of resources that the professional development team gave us to the music classroom. Because not one of those people who teaches a professional development that we have to go to, has ever been in a music classroom. A lot of those things don't fly. You get docked on your observations too if you're not including all of the things that you've learned in your professional development that don't apply to the music classroom.

Jordyn's narrative is echoed by research from Madsen and Hancock (2022) and Kreuger (2002) that found lack of administrative support and lack of understanding the class, can cause teachers to leave. For Miguel and Mark, they both had principals at their school who were unfriendly and not supportive of teachers when they needed help or were in a difficult situation. When Mark went to his principal for assistance with a disrespectful student who was on their phone during class, the principal did not support the teacher's decision to uphold the school rule and asked the student to put the phone away. Instead, he was told, "Just don't talk to that kid, let them do what they're going to do." However, as soon as the student learned that the principal would not enforce the rules, Mark lost all power in that situation. The very next day that student was on her phone again, along with half of the class, and there was nothing that Mark could do.

Similarly, Miguel went to his principal when he needed help with an out-of-control class and before he could even explain what was going on, she told him, “Don't run up on me in the hallway. Don't you dare. Don't you know how aggressive it is for a man to come up to a woman like this in the hallway, all animated? If you got a problem, you can send me an e-mail and I'll see what I can do about it.” Shortly after this interaction, one of the assistant principals spoke with Miguel about how rude it was to ask the principal for help and that he should never have done that. This interaction left Miguel feeling alone and unsupported with no one to help him in a time of need.

### **Teacher Training Gaps**

When beginning a new music teaching job, it is important to work towards building up the program and strengthening it so that the program will be sustainable for years to come. Unlike core academic classes, music classes frequently are only offered depending upon the number of students who enroll in that class. If a program is not able to show strong enrollment numbers, the job might get cut the following year. This element of building a program to be sustainable is an area that Bethany and Miguel spoke passionately about. Miguel spoke about having to grow a program that is in rough shape and said,

You start off on a train wreck and you're trying to put the train back on track. Having to learn on my own, on how to put the train back on the track was really challenging. I didn't feel like any of my classes really prepared me for that. They teach you how to do things in an optimal environment when things are already running smoothly. But they don't teach you how to jump start something from rock bottom.

Bethany said she was “ill prepared” for both managing the finances of a music program as well as fundraising. Similarly, Emily did not receive any training in financing a music program and said she “knew nothing.” This was echoed by Lautzenheiser (2001) who found

several teachers left because they were not prepared for elements of the job such as budgeting and finances. Music teachers are responsible for very expensive equipment and instruments. Knowing how to budget for your program to get equipment replaced when broken or to get instruments repaired is an essential skill if you want to have a successful program.

Lautzenheiser (2001) also discussed teachers not being prepared for communicating with parents as another reason some music teachers leave the profession. Noah and Mark talked about not knowing how to communicate with parents, especially when the topic is negative. Noah had to call a parent to tell them their child broke the school cell phone policy, so the phone had to be confiscated. The conversation quickly escalated, and Noah tried everything to not escalate it anymore. He said in that moment all he could think to do was listen to them and say, “I hear you. Thank you. Have a good day.” He was at such a loss for words or how to talk to the parents that he ended up needing the assistant principal to follow up with the parent.

Knowing how to speak to parents, especially when discussing something negative, takes practice before it gets more comfortable. Having a positive relationship with the parents is a critical part in having a successful class. Many people underestimate the power of parental support for your program and the stronger the relationships one has with the parents, the easier the tougher conversations will be.

Running an effective rehearsal for a variety of student ages and abilities was another area frequently mentioned as an area in need of more training for preservice teachers. Mark, Jordyn, and Sophie discussed a need for more training on how to structure a rehearsal and effective teaching methods. Mark stated that he received no training on how to write lesson plans. He said he did not know how to, “structure a 52-minute class period that's engaging for the kids.” Sophie said that in her undergraduate studies she was given overly specific activities that she could use in the classroom but not information on how to teach a topic. She said, “It was a super specific,

predesigned activity. This is what you can use to teach this, but not necessarily if you're teaching this concept, this is what you do, or this is what you need to be thinking of and designing your own.” When discussing teaching students who had a 504 plan or needed accommodations, Jordyn said, “they didn’t talk about that once in college.” She said that even during her student teaching time, she was not told about students who had accommodations or how to teach those specific students.

Writing lesson plans, knowing how to teach a topic, and teaching to meet the needs of the students in the room, seems like a very basic and essential piece of training. For Mark, it could be that he did not receive that training because he did not follow the traditional path of going to a university, but rather received an alternative certification. It is possible that programs like the alternative certification program do not go into as many details on how to teach as a typical university program would. What is more disappointing is knowing that Jordyn went to a well-known university and did not receive any training on 504 plans and student accommodation.

In addition to knowing how to structure a rehearsal, managing the students’ behavior in the class was also discussed as a gap in teacher preparation. Noah and Miguel talked extensively about struggling the first few years of teaching with knowing how strict to be. Noah said he would have greatly benefited from having more training in classroom management and disciplining students. He also mentioned that “being aware of the importance of having a set classroom management style at the beginning of the year” would have helped him in the first year of teaching. He said there was a small amount of training during his undergraduate studies on handling students who are misbehaving. The problem was that in any of the examples, fellow peers would need to pretend to be misbehaving students. He felt that this did not accurately portray the reality of classroom management.

Similarly, Miguel felt unprepared and stated, “The problem through our training, is everything's done in a very sterilized environment. The teacher is there and if the classroom starts getting out of hand the teacher would jump in and save you.” Roulston et al (2005) found similar results from teachers saying that they did not feel prepared for classroom management and would have benefited from more authentic, hands-on experiences.

Having positive, authentic, and hands-on experiences during their undergraduate studies and their student teaching is the goal for all preservice teachers. Unfortunately for Jordyn, that was not the case. She had a very negative experience during her undergraduate study that caused her to lose much of her passion for teaching music even before she began her career. The band director at the time was very cruel and would openly humiliate students in front of their peers. After asking a question for clarification on a dynamic change Jordyn said, “He berated me in front of the entire ensemble, calling me ignorant, stupid, disrespectful, that I was never going to be a good teacher.”

Both Miguel and Emily talked about their student teaching experience and issues they see with how student teaching works. They both mentioned how during student teaching, students are often sent to great schools with a strong well-established program and a great teacher. Very rarely are they sent to great teachers who work in a Title I school. As Emily said, “They should not be putting you into the absolute most ideal situation. They should be sending student teachers to really good teachers, but ones that maybe aren't noticed in low socioeconomic areas.” She said she did her student teaching at a wealthy school with a strong program. However, when she finished her student teaching and began her first job, she felt the need to compare her students to those at the school where she did her student teaching. Additionally, she felt like she was not doing a good enough job when they did not meet the same expectations as in the previous school.

Similarly, Miguel student taught at one of the top ranked orchestra programs in his state.

However, he said, "I feel like I learned how to build a really successful program that was already very successful. But most people, their first-year teaching at least, are not starting off at an affluent school that already has a functioning program. You start off on a train wreck." If the purpose of student teaching is to give preservice teachers an authentic experience in the classroom and best prepare them for the career, we need to really examine more closely the schools and programs that we are sending those students to.

The most frequently discussed gap in teacher training was the need for training on teaching the content to child, child development, social-emotional needs of students, and handling student traumas. With five out of the seven participants saying they were only trained in the content of the class and not in how to teach the child, that number is staggering. As Emily said, "Nobody taught me how to teach a child. They taught me how to teach orchestra. And that's not what you're teaching, that's the subject you teach. You're just taught how to teach a subject and not a kid." Miguel also said that he had no training in how to teach children and said he had no courses in child development or child psychology. This mirrors the research of Culp (2023) which found that 67% of undergraduate programs do not require any courses on socio-emotional development of children. In order to teach children well, you must look at both what is being taught, such as the content, as well as how it is being taught. A teacher cannot successfully teach a content without fully understanding the audience and how to deliver the content.

Understanding how to teach children goes deeper than simply knowing what they can and cannot do at that age, or what content is appropriate at their age. Teachers also must make a human connection with them and build a relationship. As Miguel said, "They don't care how good you are. They care how much they can trust you." For music teachers, the relationships you build, and the more the students trust you, the stronger your ensemble will be. This in turn is also building a safe space where students feel comfortable talking about difficult things. However,

that also means the teacher can become a trusted adult to whom students reveal the traumas that they are dealing with at home or at school. For five out of the seven participants, they did not know how to respond in those situations and had no prior training. As Sophie said, “Teachers are not necessarily prepared to handle students today and how they feel.” Miguel said he was not prepared for when a student told him they were raped by a family member. Sophie was not prepared for when she had to call Child Protective Services after speaking with one of her students. Being a trusted adult is an honor, but it takes a toll on a person.

Not only is there a need for more training in how to help students in these times of need and how to respond to them, but teachers also need training in how to personally cope with knowing the traumas of the students. As teachers, we care so deeply about our students, and it is hard to not be personally affected after hearing about a trauma. Some teachers may be able to cope with it better than others. However, for Miguel, he said, “I love those kids and I treated them like my kids but hearing that [trauma] would just eat me up.” As Sophie said, “I was good at being there for my kids, but I was not good at fully going home and being okay. I need to let that stuff go and I can't be worried about a kid, and how to teach kids how to deal with these things themselves that I was not prepared for.”

### **Implications**

Although there may be some things that we cannot change when it comes to teachers deciding to stay long term, we can work towards better preparing them for the career. Hopefully in turn, more music teachers will stay longer in the field. If teachers are entering the field with gaps in their preparation and knowledge of the career, we are setting them up for failure. We will continue to have incredibly high turnover rates for music teachers across the United States, unless we make a change in how we are preparing the next generation of music teachers.



Universities and teacher training institutes need to adapt the way that future teachers are being trained and adjust to the needs of both teachers and students.

This data reveals the gaps that universities can fill to better prepare teachers before entering the field and shines a light on ways that schools and administrators can better support their teachers to remain in the classroom. Music teachers who are better prepared will lead to a better experience for the students and may increase the number of students who become future music teachers. An increase in strong music teachers would also help fill the unfilled music positions around the United States.

For future research I am going to investigate orchestra teacher attrition. I want to see if there is a difference in attrition rates of orchestra teachers between elementary and secondary orchestra teachers. Additionally, I want to know if orchestra teachers are more likely to not have a full-time position or a position split between different schools in comparison to other music classes such as choral music and band music.

In this thesis I provided information on why I chose this topic of research as well as scholarly research that exists on the topic of teacher attrition, music teacher attrition, and gaps in music teacher preparation. I explained my methodology, data collection, and process for data analysis. I then shared narratives from seven former music teachers as to why they left the profession. Lastly, I drew conclusions on these findings and the implications this new data has on the field of music education.

Music educators have an incredibly important job and are an important part of many young students' lives. As Miguel said, "It's the most important thing I have ever done and probably will ever do." However, in order to make a positive impact on the lives of their students, teachers need to be well trained. This data proves the importance of having well trained music teachers who are accurately prepared for the classroom. Although we may not be able to

ensure that every new music teacher entering the field will stay in that career until retirement, we can help to ensure they are truly ready for the classroom and give them a better chance at staying long term. Also, better trained teachers will provide a better experience for the students. Students are at the heart of the classroom and are the reason teachers go into the field. We owe it not just to the field of music education but also to the students to improve the next generation of music teachers. For as cellist, Yo-Yo Ma says, “Music enhances the education of our children by helping them to make connections and broadening the depth with which they think and feel. If we are to hope for a society of culturally literate people, music must be a vital part of our children’s education.”

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. How long did you teach music?
2. What grade levels did you teach?
3. What music specialties did you teach? Orchestra, band, choir, general music?
4. Did you teach in a private or public school?
5. What do you do now?
6. What do you feel were the main reasons that you decided to leave the teaching profession?
7. Could you tell me a little bit about your first year of teaching?
8. What were the biggest challenges that you faced during your first year of teaching?
9. Did you have any support systems in place to help you?
10. Did you feel adequately prepared for teaching in your first year?
11. If so, what areas did you feel you were unprepared in or wish that you had more training on?
12. If you had more training or preparation on those things you just mentioned, do you think that would have changed your experience in the classroom or change your decision to leave teaching?
13. When did you first begin having thoughts of leaving the classroom?
14. Is there anything that would make you want to come back to teaching?
15. Is there anything that you would like to add to this conversation that I failed to ask you about?

## Appendix B

### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

#### Informed Consent to Participate in Human Subjects Research

Sadie Awad, a graduate student in Music Education at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point would appreciate your participation in a research study designed to determine what are the main reasons music teachers are leaving the profession. You are being asked to participate in an interview that should take up no more than one hour of your time. Your participation is completely voluntary. The benefit of this study is a greater knowledge about what universities and teacher preparation institutions can do to better prepare new teachers for the classroom.

We anticipate no risk to you as a result of your participation in this study other than the inconvenience of the time to complete the interview. You could, however, experience some discomfort if you have had an uncomfortable experience while being a teacher and your participation in the interview causes you to remember this.

While there may be no immediate benefit to you as a result of your participation in this study, it is hoped that we may gain valuable information about music teacher attrition which will be of future value to society.

The information you give us during the interview will be video and audio recorded and then transcribed. After the transcription the recording will be deleted. We will keep your identity confidential, and we will not release information that could identify you. All completed interviews will be kept in a University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point password protected *OneDrive* file of Sadie Awad and will not be available to anyone not directly involved in this study.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you want to withdraw from the study, at any time, you may do so without penalty or loss of benefit entitled. Only anonymous information provided will be retained. All identifiable information will be removed from the study and destroyed or deleted.

You may withdraw from the study at any time, with no consequences. Your information may be removed from the study at the request of you or the investigator.

Results determined to benefit the study and you as a participant will be provided. If additional research is sought, you will be invited to participate again.

The anticipated number of study participants is 8.

Once the study is completed, you may receive the results of the study. If you would like these results, or if you have any questions in the meantime, please contact:

Dr. Rachel Brashier  
Director of Music Education  
University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point  
Stevens Point, WI 54481



(715) 346-2227

[rbrashie@uwsp.edu](mailto:rbrashie@uwsp.edu)

If you have any complaints about your treatment as a participant in this study or believe that you have been harmed in some way by your participation, please call or write:

David Barry, PhD

IRB Chair

Associate Professor, Sociology

2100 Main St.

Old Main 208

University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point and Extension

Stevens Point, WI 54481

715.346.3799

[irb@uwsp.edu](mailto:irb@uwsp.edu)

Although Dr. Barry will ask your name, all complaints are kept in confidence.

“I have read and understand the information provided to me; that my participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw at any time.”

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

“I have read and understand that the interview will be video recorded, and all recordings will be deleted upon completion of the study.”

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C**

Greetings,

My name is Sadie Awad and I am a music education master's student at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. I am currently researching music teacher attrition and the possible connection with universities and teacher preparatory institutions. I am hoping that this research will shed some light on the gaps between what pre-service music teachers are taught and what teachers wish they were taught before entering the classroom. The goal of this research is to determine what areas music teachers felt unprepared for when beginning their career, if this lack of preparation had any impact on their decision to resign, and what universities can do to better prepare future music teachers.

I am currently looking for former music teachers who might be interested in participating in this research study. The study would include an interview over Zoom that is no longer than one hour. Would you or anyone else that you know, be interested in participating?

Your participation would be greatly appreciated and have a significant impact in better understanding teacher attrition and how universities and teacher preparatory institutions can better prepare future music educators.

Sincerely,

Sadie Awad