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A good news story: Early-career music teachers' accounts of their "flourishing" professional identities

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Offers a better understanding of music teachers' developing identities.
- Confirms that professional identities are related to perceived abilities as musicians.
- Offers a new lens on early-career teacher socialisation incorporating positive psychology.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores early-career teachers' perceptions of their professional identities, and factors impacting on their success. Findings reveal that despite discussing experiences of isolation, heavy workload, exhaustion, and lack of work-specific skills, most of the teachers interviewed demonstrated a wide range of professional and personal skills associated with a positive outlook on life and career. This evidence of 'flourishing' in the lives of early-career teachers offers a new perspective on ways to approach support and preparation for the early years in the profession.

1. Introduction

Central to effective pre-service and in-service provision is the development in teachers, over time, of a productive and realistic professional identity. Unfortunately, the knowledge and skills required by teachers are often more diverse than those offered in preservice education programs, and early-career teachers often experience praxis shock as they move from university into the first few years of school life (Ballantyne, 2007a; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Praxis shock is the experience that teachers have when their expectations of teaching life do not match up with the realities of teaching. Teachers who are suffering from praxis shock are likely to be less effective when teaching, which can have negative implications for their schools and communities. In addition, people who are suffering from the stress associated with praxis shock are likely to experience lower self-efficacy, greater emotional exhaustion, and are more likely to exhibit signs of burnout – greatly enhancing the likelihood that they will choose employment away from schools, in order to cope (Mason & Matas, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016).

The early-career period is a crucial time when teachers build their identity and classroom competence. The development of a stable and positive professional identity is a key contributor to the success experienced by early-career teachers (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Day & Gu, 2007). Teachers' professional identities influence all aspects of their job — how they teach, how they interact with colleagues, how successful they feel, and how successful they are. A productive identity aligns well with the nature of teachers' work and their perceptions of themselves, is flexible and allows for teacher agency (Beijaard et al., 2004; Sachs, 2005).

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Logically, as teachers' lives change (professionally, personally, and through experiences), so their identities change (Day & Gu, 2007). Thus, teacher identity can be understood as concerning the "self within the culture" (Arnett, 2015, p. 63). Considering professional identity in relation to broader issues, life challenges, stressors and conflicts, enables the exploration of "ongoing identity development during adulthood" (Kroger, 2015, p. 73), and produces a more dynamic picture of how teachers' perceptions of themselves shift over time.

From a psychological perspective, the development of occupational identity follows a process similar to that of individual identity development - where personal identity (individual traits) and social identity (belonging to particular groups) combine to create self-concept (Sivanathan, Arnold, Turner, & Barling, 2004). A productive identity (as conceived by Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011) is one that is characterized by "contentment, compensation, competence, and commitment" (p.107). Sivanathan et al. (2004) emphasise that enhancing occupational identity will positively affect self-concept and this in turn will enhance well-being.

The challenges of the profession are in many ways amplified for early-career music teachers, due to the isolation experienced by teachers who are (often) the only discipline specialist in their school. Indeed, Ballantyne (2007b) and Ballantyne and Grootenboer (2012) have argued that the experiences of music teachers are hugely influenced by the nature of the discipline, and by teachers' perceptions of themselves as discipline specialists. It has been established that a contributor to praxis shock and burnout in music teachers is the nexus between their perceptions of themselves as musicians and as educators (Ballantyne, Kerchner & Aróstegui, 2012; Ballantyne & Grootenboer, 2012; Hargreaves, Purves, Welch, & Marshall, 2007). Additionally, whilst teacher identity is gaining significant traction in general education literature (Beijaard et al., 2004; Cohen, 2010; Flores & Day, 2006; Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010), and music education literature (Draves, 2014; Mark, 1998; Pellegrino, 2009; Scheib, 2006), there is the need to explore the *development* of music teacher identity in the first few years of teaching because it is during the early years of teaching that music teachers make decisions about the kind of teachers they are going to be, and whether they will continue on in the profession (Ballantyne et al., 2012).

Accordingly, this paper explores how early-career music teachers develop their professional identities, and how teacher identity impacts on their successes. Specifically, we explore 1) early-career teachers' articulated perceptions of their professional identities, 2) the factors that influenced their developing professional identities, and 3) how their circumstances and ways of viewing their experiences have impacted on their entry into the profession.

2. The study: method

This paper reports on a qualitative sub-set of data generated through a longitudinal, mixed methods investigation into early-career music teachers' identity development in Australia. Participants were recruited from the pool of teachers who indicated their willingness to be involved in follow-up interviews when they completed an online questionnaire. A selection strategy of *maximum variation* (Given & Saumure, 2008) was utilised, with participants chosen to represent employment in a variety of school types, number of years teaching, pre-service courses undertaken, and type of employment. A single semi-structured interview (see Appendix for protocol) was conducted by a research assistant with each of the 14 early-career music teachers, audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interviews lasted approximately 40–50 min.

2.1. Sample

The sample consisted of three male and eleven female teachers (see Table 1).

2.2. Analyses

The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service provider and sent to the participants for proofreading and approval. Teacher's real names have been replaced with pseudonyms, to protect their anonymity. This paper details the findings from two stages of analysis. In the first stage, a preliminary exploratory analysis of the transcribed interviews was undertaken by summarising participants' comments. The process of summarising/paraphrasing participants' responses is recommended as the first step towards looking for emerging themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The authors adopted the process of typological analysis (Ayres & Knafi, 2008), where the major themes are identified as part of the research questions and incorporated into data collection as an organising framework. The analysis of interviews was undertaken by each author separately, and then discussed. This discussion iteratively enabled the discovery of connections between themes and created a theoretical ordering of the emergent categories, following Creswell's (2015) procedures. The thematic analysis implemented here used a "realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Such an approach allowed the researchers to "theorize motivations, experience, and meaning in a straightforward way, because a simple, largely unidirectional relationship [was] assumed" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85).

Throughout the analysis, it became increasingly clear that most of the participants, despite encountering difficulties typical to the early years of teaching, were remarkably "upbeat" about their professional identity, their professional roles, and their future in the profession. In order to fully investigate this emergent finding, stage two of the data analysis saw the theoretical framework proposed by Seligman (2011) used as a lens to further interrogate teachers' perspectives of their early-years of teaching (see 3.2.1). This enabled us to move beyond a descriptive account of their professional identity, and propose a new way of examining early-years teachers' accounts of their professional experience, and likely success in the workforce. Elo and Kyngäs (2008) demonstrated that both inductive (open coding, category creation and abstraction) and deductive approaches (re-testing data according to existing categories) are highly reliable methods of content analysis in qualitative research. Therefore, we adopted a hybrid approach of deductive and inductive thematic analysis, where theory-driven categories were integrated with data-integrated ones (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The study reflected eight "big tent" criteria for qualitative research developed by Tracy (2010), in that it worked towards a "worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical and meaningful coherence" (p. 840). To ensure trustworthiness of findings, we pursued the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln, 2004), documenting the research process and findings in detail (Given & Saumure, 2008; Mathison, 2005). The results are transferable, as they are being communicated in a manner designed to resonate with and assist early-career music educators in considering their own situations (Lincoln, 2004). The dependability of the research process and its findings has been established through independent data analyses undertaken by each of the researchers individually, followed by collaborative discussions in a repeated circular process to generate themes. Rich participant quotes from the interviews were used to increase the trustworthiness of the findings and to