

Music Educator Stress: Causes, Solutions, and Steps Towards Change

Jonathan Oliveira

MUED 6380: Seminar in Current Issues and Topics in Music Education

Dr. Lisa Martin

May 15, 2019

Summary

The Housewright Declaration is the result of the 1999 Housewright Symposium held to devise goals to be achieved by the year 2020 (Vision 2020, 2019). It consists of twelve tenets set forth as guidelines to the further development of the music educator's role as a leader and mentor in the community, the integration of music of all cultures as well as developing technologies in the classroom, and the promotion of lifelong musiking opportunities for persons of all ages, cultures, genders, and socioeconomical backgrounds. However, one of the many challenges that face music educators and that the Housewright Declaration does not address leading up to the year 2020 is teacher stress. This includes its causes, how it affects teachers, and how teachers can cope with it.

Although the American Psychological Association distinguishes between acute, episodic acute, and chronic stress (Miller, & Smith, 2011), the last of these is of particular interest for music educators. It is described as the kind of stress that eats away at people daily, resulting in health conditions, burnout, and even teachers leaving the occupation altogether. One of the reasons why chronic stress can be so damaging according to Miller and Smith is that "People get used to it. They forget it's there" (2011).

Although stress can be present in any occupation, teacher stress has been on the rise. Shaw (2016) shows that the number of research respondents in general education who reported feeling stressed several days per week increased from 36% in 1985 to 51% in 2012. McGrath and Huntington (2007) similarly found that 50% of the kindergarten teachers they interviewed found teaching a stressful occupation. Multiple sources of teacher stress have been identified, including demands from administrators and policy makers, and relationships in and outside of the school. Teacher stress can therefore be seen as the result of work pressure, as an emotional

response to teaching, or even as being derived from the interaction between demands placed on the teacher and the resources available (Collie, Perry, & Martin, 2017).

The effects of teacher stress are also felt by those educators who specialize in teaching music. Shaw (2016) found that lack of support at work, lack of autonomy, size of the workload, and issues concerning conflicts with colleagues, students, and parents, have been constant stressors for music educators. Although these stressors are common among educators in many different areas, there are ways in which they can be unique to music educators, such as larger class size. Accountability can pose particular problems for music educators, such as the incompatibility between evaluation parameters and the reality of a music classroom. Overland (2014) shows that the two main models of teacher evaluation – student-centered measures and teacher-centered measures – are flawed for evaluating music teachers. This is because the first model disregards evidence that student output can be influenced by factors unrelated to the teacher, while the latter relies heavily (and perhaps unreasonably) on the musical competence and knowledge of the evaluation administrator. The result is that music teachers often have to cater to the evaluator rather than to the quality of student's education: "I tell my kids [...] 'It doesn't matter if we just gave the best concert ever [...] I won't get an A in teaching if you talk, so keep that in mind when you see someone in the room'" (Shaw, 2016, p. 109).

Barriers

In researching teacher stress, it is important to identify what the sources of stress are. According to Collie, Perry, and Martin (2017) support from leadership, relationships with students and colleagues, and educational policies have been identified as significant stressors for educators worldwide. In their research, they identify a correlation between micro-management from school principals, school boards, and government overseers, and increased levels of stress

in the work environment. This type of atmosphere leads to teachers perceiving that their opinions do not count. This belief in turn leaves teachers in the stressful position of having to use prescribed teaching methods, which may even conflict with their own teaching philosophies. The authors then contrast this type of situation with the well-being reported by teachers when given some degree of autonomy.

Collie and colleagues also highlight the relationship between teacher-teacher and teacher-student relationships and the levels of stress reported by educators. They highlight, for instance, that higher levels of stress are reported by teachers who work in schools where the diversity of needs is not matched by the number of teachers available to work with students. The challenges in these situations may be so great as to hamper the teacher's ability to connect with students, making teaching and classroom management more stressful. Gordon (2002) agrees that in-class student behavior is a significant stressor especially in urban areas, where class sizes are larger. Relationships with colleagues are also important. Krueger (2000) names feelings of isolation as one of the factors that most affects music teachers' satisfaction with the occupation. For Clement (2017) this is one of the primary reasons why music teachers reach the extreme point of leaving their jobs altogether.

Besides autonomy and relationship issues, Collie et al also found that accountability and standardized testing can also be linked to levels of teacher stress, especially in schools where teacher evaluation is based on student performance. Smith and Kovacs (2011) found that 79% of the teachers interviewed felt that having to prepare students for standardized tests reduced the time available for teaching non-tested topics, while 86% reported that it increased the pressure (and therefore stress) they felt. Regarding educational policies, the Collie et al showed that the frequency with which they are changed can affect the teacher's perception of their own ability,

qualification, and resources to implement said policies. This in turn can lead to teachers perceiving new policies as threats rather than a positive challenge for improvement, resulting in elevated stress.

These stress factors have been reported in music education as well. For Madsen and Hancock (2002), administrative support, job recognition, and lack of support from colleagues are all job-related stressors that have played a role in music teacher stress, burnout, and ultimately music teachers leaving the career, alongside other factors such as workload, deadlines, and family matters. This is supported by Clement (2017), who named heavy teaching loads, the size of classes, and the need for multiple class preparations (all of which are determined by administrative staff) as contributing factors for teacher stress even in general education. According to Hancock (2016), dissatisfaction with administrative support was named as the cause for transferring to a different school by 20.8% of the music educators he interviewed. Stress due to lack of administrative support can take the form of role stress, perceived by Scheib (2003) as the disparity between expectations in the workplace. For instance, this stress is experienced by teachers who also coach athletic organizations within a school. A music teacher experiences this in the conflict between directing performance ensembles and academic classroom instruction. Role conflict also occurs when a teacher has administrative duties. Many of Schieb's study participants reported having to fulfill administrative duties that were outside of their area of expertise. Role conflict although stressful, can often be an essential part of the workings of a school. Cornelius (1989) found that the majority of music administrators at the college level had been trained for teaching positions and that, in smaller universities, both these roles were often carried out by a single person. Scheib (2003) shows that the stress arising from conflict between roles within a school can be further aggravated when occupational duties

conflict with the expectations of teachers' personal lives. For example, in the interviews he conducted, he spoke to teachers who reported struggling with teaching children at school while at the same time having to raise their own. This is supported by Hancock (2016), who found in his research that 23% of music teachers leave the occupation due to pregnancy or parenting and 9% leave for personal reasons.

In addition to being overworked, music teachers also experience isolation beyond what is seen in general education. Sindberg (2011) points out that, besides being only a small portion of the school staff, music teachers often have to travel between schools within a district. Because of this, music educators are part of all of the schools, but also part of none of them. In addition to not being able to be properly part of their teaching communities, the teachers interviewed by Sindberg also mentioned the difficulty in connecting with students due to the large number of students that music teachers have to work with. Sindberg also found lack of respect from colleagues and the community due to not understanding what music educators do to be a contributing factor to feelings of isolation and the resulting stress.

The Profession's Response to Stress

In response to the growing amount of stress experienced by music teachers as they navigate job expectations, relationships with students and teachers, and government policies, the music education community has sought to research and implement methods of coping with stress and increasing well-being. Of particular interest when dealing with the frustrations with leadership is the research relating to stress reduction and mindfulness. Varona (2018) says that, while external stressors may be difficult for music educators to control, they can take control of their own reactions to these situations. The importance she places on this is that, if unchecked, negative feelings may affect the classroom environment. She suggests the practice of

mindfulness as a means of analyzing stressful situations with a clear mind without identifying a situation as good or bad. According to Varona, this will allow the music teacher to analyze the cause of stress, determine a positive and appropriate reaction to it, and possibly even find a remedy the causes of stress in the workplace.

In dealing with stress due to interpersonal relations in schools, Krueger (2000) highlighted that both administrators and teachers can help reduce isolation-related teacher stress and increase well-being through mentoring. Doss (2016) shows that music teachers in the early stages of their careers are under more stress than their more experienced peers, as they feel overwhelmed by the demands of the occupation they are entering. Krueger (2000) encourages older teachers to help their younger colleagues get through the first years of teaching. According to him, this can be particularly effective in music education when music teachers are mentored by fellow musicians. Another aspect of relationship-induced stress pertains to one's relationship to oneself. Farmer (2006) emphasized the importance of self-care for stress management and well-being, particularly exercise and good nutrition. Farmer shows that eating fruit and vegetables can help increase energy level, making it vital for the teacher to make time to eat a proper lunch. Physical exercise, especially when stressed, helps increase mental concentration (and thus productivity), reduces stress, and prevents cardiovascular and musculoskeletal health issues. She also highlights the importance of staying organized, taking on a hobby, and learning to say "no" whenever possible.

Finally, the National Association for Music Education issued a Teacher Evaluation Position Statement (2019) to help deal with teacher stress caused by policies, particularly those pertaining to teacher evaluation. The purpose of this statement is not only to ensure that music teachers are evaluated fairly and by standards that accurately measure the music teacher's

activities, but also to ensure that students receive the highest possible quality of music education. The position statement reads, for example, that music teacher evaluations should be conducted by an individual who has the professional expertise needed to observe the music teacher's activities and give accurate feedback and evaluation. It states also that when evaluation is based on student growth, it must take into account the students' beginning levels, so as to measure the growth more precisely.

Next Steps to Address Stress

The principles described above are valid at the macro level as well. If teachers are overworked to the point of wanting to leave the music education occupation altogether, how does that benefit schools? What is the use of the government creating demanding, success-driven protocols for music education, and education in general, if the teachers who will ultimately strive to put them into practice are not able to do so due to health problems? If principals, school districts, and state and federal agencies want students to succeed, they must first make it possible for teachers to succeed. Schieb (2003) suggested that part of the issue in this situation is the understaffing of schools. Perhaps stress could be reduced if administrators and policy-makers allocated funds in a manner more compatible with the policies being instituted. Education institutions would then be able to provide teachers with the financial, temporal, and emotional tools they need to function at the highest level possible.

Another way policy-makers and administrators can work towards reducing teacher stress is by promoting physical and mental health. Teachers must have not only a proper lunch period, but also appropriate paid preparation time so they do not have to spend time during their lunch hour preparing classes. Teachers also need to commute between buildings or schools and administrators should plan teacher's schedules accordingly. Finally, leisure and exercise time

should be allotted in teachers' schedules. At the very least, schools should be given the funds to hire a professional to help teachers stay physically fit. After all, if we want good students, we must first have not only high quality, but healthy teachers.

Conclusion

In this paper I showed that much of music teacher stress arises from problems with administration, interpersonal issues, and the unrealistic expectations of local, state, and national government agencies, expressed in education policies. I also showed what those involved in music education have done to remedy these issues. Research shows that school administration can promote teacher well-being by providing adequate time for planning classes and eating healthy meals. They can also encourage mentorship to help young teachers feel like part of the teaching community and to help them cope with the extreme pressure of the first years of teaching. Music teachers can also help themselves by adopting healthy eating and exercising habits. In dealing with leadership, interpersonal, and policy problems, it is not always possible for the teacher to fix what is wrong. A good practice to help insure one's mental health is mindfulness – to evaluate the situations and the options available before passing judgement. A healthy mindset is the first step towards a healthy mind.

In summary I showed that, while stressors in music education abound, so do solutions. to music teacher stress do exist. However, it is not enough to simply know them. We must act on them. Policy-makers and administrators must understand that music teachers are not numbers on a statistics chart. They are human beings with physical and emotional needs, who need certain conditions to be met in order to function at the highest level possible. Teachers must support each other to get past stressful situations. As educators and musicians, we must collectively advocate for and promote better work conditions. Change starts when we help ourselves.

References

- Clement, M. (2017). Why combatting teachers' stress is everyone's job. *The Clearing House*, 90(4), 135-138. DOI: 10.1080/00098655.217.1323519
- Collie, R.J., Perry, N.E., & Martin, A.J. (2017). School context and educational system factors impacting educator stress. In McIntyre, T. M., McIntyre, S. E., & Francis, D. J. (Eds.), *Educator Stress: An Occupational Health Perspective* (3-22). Cham, Switzerland: Springer. Retrieved from <https://link-springer-com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/book/10.1007%2F978-3-319-53053-6#toc>
- Doss, J.A. (2016). *Perceived stress among public school music educators: Stress over time, demographic differences, common self-identified factors of stress, and relationships between demographic differences and emergent stress themes* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/handle/10355/49404>
- Farmer, S.M. (2006). *A handbook pertaining to music educators' stress management, physical activity, and nutrition* (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send_file?accession=bgsu1143143433&disposition=inline
- Gordon, D.G. (2002). Discipline in the music classroom: One component contributing to teacher stress. *Music Education Research*, 4(1), 157 – 165. DOI: 10.1080/14613800220119831
- Hancock, C.B. (2016). Is the grass greener? Current and former music teachers' perceptions a year after moving to a different school or leaving the classroom. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 63(4), 421-438. DOI: 10.1177/0022429415612191
- Krueger, P.J. (2000). Beginning music teachers: Will they leave the profession? *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*, 19(1), 22-26. DOI:10.1177/875512330001900105

- Madsen, C.K., & Hancock, C.B. (2002). Support for music education: A case study of issues concerning teacher retention and attrition. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 50(1), 6-19
- McGrath, B.J. & Huntington, A.D. (2007). The health and wellbeing of adults working in early childhood education. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 32(3), 33 – 38
- Miller, L.H., & Smith, A.D. (2011). Stress: The different kinds of stress [adapted online article]. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stress-kinds>
- Overland, C.T. (2014). Teacher evaluation and music education: joining the national discussion. *Music Educators Journal*, 101(1), 56-62. DOI: 10.1177/0027432114534448
- Scheib, J.W. (2003). Role stress in the professional life of the school music teacher: A collective case study. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 51(2), 124 – 36. DOI: 10.2307/3345846
- Shaw, R.D. (2016). Music teacher stress in the era of accountability. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 117(2), 104 – 116. DOI: 10.1080/10632913.2015.1005325
- Sindberg, L.K. (2011). Alone all together: The conundrum of music teacher isolation and connectedness. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 189, 7–22.
- Smith, J.M., Kovacs, P.E. (2009). The impact of standards-based reform on teachers: The case of ‘No child left behind.’ *Teachers and Teaching*, 17(2), 201 – 225. DOI: 10.1080/13540602.2011.539802
- Teacher Evaluation (Position Statement). (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://nafme.org/about/position-statements/teacher-evaluation-position-statement/>
- Varona, D.A. (2018). The mindful music educator: Strategies for reducing stress and increasing well-being. *Music Educators Journal*, 105(2), 64-71. DOI: 10.1177/0027432118804035

Vision 2020 (2019). Retrieved from <https://nafme.org/about/history/vision-2020-the-housewright-symposium-on-the-future-of-music-education/>