

QUESTIONS ASKED IN JOB INTERVIEWS OF MUSIC TEACHERS

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This study describes and interprets the results of a survey of recently graduated music teachers regarding the questions they were asked by school administrators during interviews for music teaching jobs. The scores indicated that the questions identified by the principals in our previous qualitative study were asked of the survey respondents and represented the following areas: (a) discipline/classroom management, (b) teaching and learning, and (c) philosophy of teaching. Based on the overall results, several implications became apparent for music teacher educators to consider when preparing students to interview for music teaching jobs.

Inspiration for the Study

The process of applying for, interviewing for, and accepting a teaching position is important to both novice and experienced music teachers. In particular, the greatest opportunity for

music teachers to develop their interviewing skills occurs as they complete their music methods courses and begin their careers. As music teacher educators, we have continued to be interested in how to best prepare our students for the process of applying for and interviewing for music jobs.

In order to provide a more meaningful context for our students, we have routinely invited school principals to visit with our students in a seminar setting during the student teaching semester. These encounters have been extremely helpful to our students. They have also continued to raise additional questions regarding the hiring process from the principal's perspective. For example, principals have typically stressed the importance of specific qualities they look for in new teachers, but it has often been unclear which of these qualities are "music specific."

Because of this lack of clarity, we decided to develop and conduct a research study that focused on how principals hired music teachers. Specifically, we wanted to gain information that would allow us to better understand which qualities principals were

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searching for during the interviewing process. We believed that such information would ultimately enable us to better prepare our students for the interview process beyond the typical interview "checklist" and "hiring strategies" tips provided by various sources (American Association for Employment in Education, 1999; Cowden, 1990; Pawlas, 1995). We also believed that such information would provide a more complete perspective when viewed in conjunction with qualities identified as important for developing exemplary teachers once they are in teaching positions (G. King, 1997). This paper contains a brief summary of the principals' survey followed by a description of how its results led to subsequent study of the hiring process for music teachers. Our observations regarding predominant interview techniques are compared and contrasted with those of various experts both in the field of music education and in other areas. The implications for interviewees are presented.

Initial Study: Principals' Interviews

The purpose of our initial study was to discover how the principals interviewed and hired music teachers. We specifically wanted to know if they had an "ideal" music teacher in mind that influenced their interviewing and hiring. We were also interested in what factors had contributed to the development of their "ideal" music teacher and program. We purposefully selected principals with varied jobs and experiences: elementary, secondary, rural, and urban. Three males and one female principal were extensively interviewed with a semi-structured interview protocol. The protocol focused on questions

regarding the hiring of music teachers.

As we gathered and analyzed data, three themes became apparent as being important to principals when they hired music teachers: Ideal Teacher, Teacher Evaluation, and Teacher Selection. These themes, along with the background of the principal, led us to propose an interactive model (Brinkman & Mallett, 1997, p. 24) that more clearly explained the teacher selection process.

In our interactive model, the Ideal Teacher component appeared to be based on experiences with music teachers with whom the principals had worked. Therefore, this "ideal" was based on a "real" model with perceived teaching strengths and weaknesses. It was also evident that Teacher Evaluation was in the minds of the principals as they interviewed because the principals would be responsible for evaluating whomever they hired. Flowing from the Ideal Teacher and Teacher Evaluation components, the resulting Teacher Selection strategies used by the principals included screening, structured-to-free-flowing formats, and the use of committees or one-on-one discussions. Through these various strategies, the principals hoped to gain information from interviewees that would enable them to hire "ideal" music teachers who would be more likely to receive positive teaching evaluations in the future.

The principals also provided numerous examples of the kinds of questions they asked people who were interviewing for music teaching jobs. Based on this information, it seemed logical to us that the next step was to compare the types of questions described by the principals in our ini-

tial study to questions asked of our recent music education graduates who had successfully interviewed for teaching positions. By doing so, we believed that we would be able to discover if similarities existed between what we had learned from the principals and the experiences of our graduates.

Second Study: Survey of First-Year Teachers

The purpose of our second study was to compare what the principals told us to what our students reported being asked during "real" interviews. In order to make our comparisons, we compiled a list of questions based on those identified by the principals in our initial study. The questions were either verbatim from the principals' interviews or from documents the principals had provided as examples of guidelines they used to conduct interviews.

The interview questions were listed on a survey that was sent to forty-nine music teachers who had graduated within a two-year period. A response rate of 76% produced thirty-seven surveys. The respondents had interviewed and subsequently taken teaching positions in the following states (number for each state indicated): California (1), Colorado (4), Idaho (1), Iowa (1), Kansas (1), Missouri (3), Nebraska (8), Nevada (1), North Carolina (1), South Dakota (1), Texas (3), and Wyoming (12).

The respondents were asked to assess how often questions were asked during their job interviews using the following scale: 1 = very often, 2 = sometimes, 3 = seldom, and 4 = not asked. Based on this scale, means and standard deviations were calculated, and scores were rank-ordered. The

resulting scores ranged from $M = 1.162$ to $M = 3.378$ (see Table 1).

Based on the reported rankings of the interview questions, the results of the survey appeared to verify that the questions identified by the principals in our initial study were asked by hiring officials at various sites. It was also interesting to note that the question often described by our students as difficult to answer ("Tell me about yourself") was ranked as the most often asked. The principals had described this question as a way to get the interview process started, and one principal called it an "obligatory question." This query might also be characterized as a "first impression" question because it was intended to set the stage for further conversation and inquiry. After the "first impression" query, the remaining questions represented an interesting mix of topics.

Discipline/Classroom Management. "What are your ideas about discipline?" and "Tell me what I'll see happening in your classroom" were ranked second and third. The frequency with which these questions were asked appears to indicate that classroom management is a primary area of concern for hiring officials in the schools.

Teaching and Learning. These questions seemed to be ranked in the midrange (sometimes asked), indicating a relatively high interest regarding the way music teachers reach the variety of learners in their classes. Specific approaches to teaching and learning were ranked as fairly important. These included questions about lesson planning, teaching strategies, student success, and the applicants' musical background. Examples of teaching and learning questions were: "Tell me what

Table 1
Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Interview Questions Asked

<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Question
1.162	0.501	Tell me about yourself.
1.297	0.571	What are your ideas about discipline?
1.756	0.863	Tell me what I'll see happening in your classroom.
1.783	0.947	Why do you want to be a music teacher?
1.916	0.967	Why do you want to come to this school and teach?
1.972	0.866	Why should I hire you?
2.054	1.053	Tell me about your musical training and experience.
2.162	1.014	What is your philosophy of education?
2.432	1.144	How would you make sure students are successful in music?
2.513	1.096	Do you believe all students can learn?
2.527	1.028	What are the most important ways a teacher can help students?
2.594	1.257	Tell me how you are going to develop a lesson plan based on your methodologies.
2.648	1.060	How can you tell you've had a good class session?
2.702	0.968	Why is music important in the educational scheme?
3.378	0.828	How would your best friend describe you?

Note. Means and standard deviations were calculated and scores were rank-ordered based on the following scale: 1 = very often, 2 = sometimes, 3 = seldom, 4 = not asked.

I'll see happening in your classroom" (also a classroom management question), "How would you make sure students are successful in music?," "Do you believe all students can learn?," and "Tell me how you are going to develop a lesson plan based on your methodologies."

Philosophy of Teaching. Several questions that addressed the topic of philosophy of teaching were: "Why do you want to come to this school and teach?," "What is your philosophy of education?," "Why should I hire you?," and "Why is music important in the educational scheme?" The relative importance of these questions is in line with what various music educators have

stated as essential in preparing for interviews. It would seem our results support Hoffer (1991) and others (Elliott, 1995; Reimer, 1989) who have stressed the importance of knowing how to clearly express a philosophy of teaching music, especially for novice teachers.

Qualitative Results

We also asked the respondents to share their observations of the interviews they had experienced. All of the respondents provided such comments. Based on our examination of the comments in relation to the ranking of the questions, we arrived at the following major issues as reflected in the statements we received.

Classroom Management: "How will you handle problems?" An interviewee for a grade K–8 vocal/general job observed, "Classroom management was a very important issue at all of my interviews." According to the respondents, management questions were often situation specific and required the teachers to describe not only their management plans and techniques, but also how they would apply them. An interviewee for a high school instrumental job observed, "All of the interviewers who asked about discipline ... asked if I had a hard copy of my policy; they wanted to see it in writing." Another secondary music teacher stated, "Most of the emphasis was spent on dealing with students and discipline plans." An applicant for a middle level instrumental job observed, "I also found that a lot of situational questions were asked on a regular basis (e.g., How would you handle this situation in your classroom?)."

It could be surmised that the administrators were keenly aware that without solid management techniques, music teachers were less likely to be successful. It also seemed that this concern was present regardless of which level or area of music teaching was being discussed. Survey respondents who commented specifically about management questions had interviewed for music teaching jobs at all grade levels and for general, vocal, and instrumental music.

Personal Attributes: "How do you come across during your first interview?" An obvious theme throughout the comments from the teachers was the importance of personal presentation skills. As a respondent observed during an interview for a middle-level instru-

mental job, "Many of the questions I was asked dealt with what kind of personal qualities I had ... not so much what my educational background and experiences were." These skills focused on how well the interviewees presented themselves during the interview. As a middle-level vocal applicant observed, "The positive comments I received after my interviews were more about how I presented myself ... not my actual answers." A grade 7–12 instrumental interviewee commented on how the applicants should present themselves:

I would say that the number one thing that hires new teachers is personality! How do you come across during your first impression? Your transcripts, portfolio, and references are very important, but if an administrator doesn't like what they see at first glance, you won't have a chance! Be energetic.

Along with a positive, energetic personality, a grade K–6 general music applicant observed that dress seemed to be important, "Even though you may want an elementary position, dress as though you are interviewing to be CEO of a large company. Every time I wore my 'power suit,' I was called back for a second interview." However, the advice most often given by the survey respondents regarding personal presentation was reflected by a grade 5–12 instrumental interviewee who stated, "I guess my observation would be that if you're confident in your abilities and base your answers on well-founded sources, you'll be fine."

Based on the comments of teacher respondents, it appeared that the administrators were not only interested

in how interviewees presented themselves, but also in how well they would be able to relate to others in the school and the community. The respondents were often asked to provide ideas for communicating an enthusiasm for music to others. As a middle school interviewee noted, "They were looking for genuine enthusiasm for the teaching of music and for the ability to articulate ideas and philosophies." A grade K-8 vocal/general respondent also said, "In addition, administrators were very interested in how I was going to relate to parents and the community."

Teaching Skills: "Teaching well seems to be more important than what you teach." A significant number of comments from the respondents focused on the fact that many administrators wanted to know about the respondents' teaching skills in general terms, not specifically in music. For example, a grade 4-8 instrumental interviewee stated, "There was little regard for my skills as a music educator. I don't know if it was due to the interviewer's lack of knowledge about music or if they were actually more concerned about me being a good educator as opposed to being a good music educator." This comment and those of some of the other respondents suggested that the interviewer's lack of emphasis in the interviewees' teaching abilities in music specifically may have been due to a lack of knowledge or understanding of music teaching on the part of the administrator. A middle-school vocal interviewee observed, "I only interviewed three times, and none of the principals/ superintendents were knowledgeable in the field of music." The impression that musical knowledge was assumed and therefore not a

focus of the interview was also noted by a grade 6-12 vocal applicant: "Most administrators think they know all there is to know about teaching and feel if you have a degree in music, you must be able to teach."

Although as a group the administrators did not appear to focus on music, the teachers did make comments about how they were asked to demonstrate general teaching skills. For example, a teacher who interviewed for a grade K-12 vocal and instrumental job stated that although she was not asked many questions about music, she did "have to teach one of the principals a first trumpet lesson during the interview." In another interview for a middle level vocal position, the applicant had to provide a demonstration of teaching skills to the interview panel who "told me to go outside the room and come back in and teach them something for three to five minutes. My advice is to ... have some definite ideas and lesson plans in your head and ready."

Comparisons and Implications

A review of existing literature revealed that our results correlated with previous studies. There was a general agreement among administrators as to "teacher-selection" factors and methods (Henry, 1982; King, 1991; Troisi, 1995). It was also evident that our study identified specific qualities similar to those identified by others. Frase (1991) stated that hiring the best teachers must be based on teaching ability. He also affirmed that the best way to determine this information was to ask interviewees to solve "hypothetical problems in the classroom" (Frase, 1991, p. 23). In an attempt to "screen"

applicants, Ash (1992) suggested questions be asked that would determine if the applicant has the following qualities: "(a) a sense of mission and enthusiasm, (b) communication skills, (c) knowledge of ways to vary instruction, (d) the ability to articulate knowledge of a curriculum area, (e) the ability to serve as a good role model for children, and (f) an enjoyment of teaching students" (p. 40). Grohe's study (1981) also determined that the three most important screening factors for teachers included teaching ability, good oral communication skills, and an amiable personality.

Although the results of our study appear to support the conclusions and suggestions of others, our findings are also unique because they offer specific insights regarding the hiring techniques currently being employed by school administrators in their attempts to hire music teachers. Therefore, based on the results of our research, the following implications for music teacher educators are suggested:

1. Hiring officials are not likely to ask "music specific" questions. Therefore, applicants must respond in ways that highlight their strengths in a "music specific" manner. For example, when asked, "Tell me what I'll see happening in your classroom," an applicant should describe specific musical activities, concepts, outcomes, and effects.

2. Our goal as music teacher educators should be to prepare music teacher applicants to be able to analyze the application and interview situations to their benefit. The idea of "reflective practitioner" is pertinent here, as well as after a position is taken.

3. Classroom management, teaching techniques, philosophy, and per-

sonal attributes are important to hiring officials. Music teacher educators need to address these areas via methods classes and student teaching and in ways that will enable students to make use of such information during the job search process. Teacher educators should prepare students to answer "standard" questions likely to be asked in any job interview. However, it is not enough to have "pat answers." The entire musical and collegiate careers of students should prepare them to answer questions in a knowledgeable and impassioned way.

4. Teacher educators should continue to solicit feedback from students about the hiring processes they experience. As hiring practices evolve (e.g., site-based management committees), we need to understand the implications for our teaching and research.

Because of an apparently increasing demand for music teachers (Asmus, 1999), there is an immediate need to provide beginning teachers with information about the interview process. This information will enable them not only to do well in an interview, but also to determine which teaching jobs align best with their strengths and goals. Without adequate preparation, beginning teachers may not be able to effectively consider job offers from administrators who are anxious to fill positions. A teaching career begins with a hiring decision between a school district representative and a teacher. As teacher educators, it is our job to continue to provide timely information to our students that will enable them to find the "fit" that makes that first teaching job a success for the teacher, the administrator, and, most importantly, the students.

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