

‘ZOOMING IN/ZOOMING OUT’: EXPLORING UNDERSTANDING AND DEVELOPING SHARED MEANINGS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD MUSIC EDUCATION

Lisa M. Gruenhagen, Ph.D., Bowling Green State University
lgruenh@bgsu.edu

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999a) acknowledge that, over the past two decades, teacher learning has become one of the most important concerns in education. Researchers illustrate the importance of focusing on teacher learning in the workplace (Shulman, 1997b; Guskey, 1995; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1999; Wilson & Berne, 1999) and state that practice-based inquiry could contribute to teacher learning while serving as productive professional development (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Lampert & Ball (1999) contend that while we have learned a great deal about the kinds of knowledge teachers need in order to teach well, “knowing teaching is more than applying prior understandings” (p. 37). “Knowing teaching,” means knowing certain things in the situation, and from one moment to the next being able to observe, infer, interpret, and make claims. They argue for teacher education designed so that “prospective teachers will learn to develop flexible understandings and ways of knowing in and about teaching” (p. 39). While teachers need to be prepared for the predictable aspects, they also need preparation for the unpredictable in teaching. Lampert & Ball suggest accomplishing this kind of learning through investigation in groups using common artifacts and materials drawn from teaching practice – taking an inquiry stance, posing questions and solving real problems rooted in practice.

While music education researchers have placed a focus on preservice music teachers’ learning, research related to the development of inservice music teachers’ professional knowledge and practice remains limited. The purpose of this case study was to investigate what happens when a group of early childhood and elementary music teachers engage in collaborative professional development. With career stages ranging from novice to veteran, this teacher cohort met once a month over the course of one school year to discuss music teaching and learning. The research questions focused on what these teachers wanted to know and whether those desires were linked to particular contexts, skills, or materials. As they explored understanding in the context of early childhood and elementary music, the teachers wondered about the stages of children’s musical development. What does it mean for a young child to show her understanding? What does this understanding look like? What experiences impact children’s musical understanding? Through the telling of stories about teaching practice and musical children – zooming in to examine the details, and zooming out to obtain a broader perspective, the group developed shared meanings situated in local contexts and practice.

Documenting teachers’ stories about practice, their perceptions about their own learning, about their students’ learning, and about their inquiry work with colleagues would result in rich narratives of local practice-based learning. These narratives could provide a window into the dynamic and complex world of music teaching and learning, while providing a voice for those teachers and their students.