

MUSIC TEACHER RETENTION IN URBAN SCHOOLS: SOME CLUES TO BEST PRACTICE

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Comments to accompany the powerpoint

At the first Society for Music Teachers Education Symposium in 2005, keynote speaker Richard Ingersoll presented statistics which suggested that approximately 60% of teachers in urban schools leave within the first five years of their careers. Ingersoll did not have access to statistics for urban music educators, but suggested the figures would probably be similar. As a professor at an urban university whose students sometimes eventually teach in urban settings, this was disturbing and raised several questions for me. 1) What factors influence the urban music teachers' decisions to leave or to stay in urban teaching? 2) What pre-professional training do urban music teachers wish they had had? 3) What in-service professional training and mentoring is helpful?

In an effort to tease out some answers to these questions I began a ten-year research project with volunteers from among our students that follows them through their first five years of teaching. This study is a collaboration between these young music educators and me, a music teacher educator. The purpose of this study is explore what problems to young urban music teachers perceive that they encounter in their first five years of teaching and how they deal with them. The method is that of exploratory case studies.

The volunteer participants meet face to face with me once each semester for the first five years of their teaching careers for individual, semi-structured, recorded interviews. They are encouraged to email me weekly reflections on their teaching experiences and to raise questions to which I respond. Data sets include these emails and transcripts of audio recordings of interviews. Fortunately for their students and unfortunately for the study, only one teacher participant has left urban teaching during the course of this study. The others all continue teaching in urban settings.

One factor that has emerged is that teachers who grew up in the city schools tend to be more satisfied with teaching there than those who did not attend city schools themselves. Another relevant factor seems to be the student teaching experience. Not surprisingly, those who student taught in urban settings are happier teaching there and feel better prepared to address the challenges that arise.

One confounding factor is the frequently communications with the researcher. The participants feel that is one of the helpful aspects of participating in the study. When asked to comment on the best aspects of urban teaching the factor most often mentioned is the diversity and interest in music of the students they teach. The challenging aspects include relationships with other staff members and audience behavior at performances. Their mentors were often not music educators and often were ineffectual. Among the

helpful aspects of professional development were having a support group of other urban music educators, participating in other professional music activities, talking with more experienced peers and taking graduate classes.