Music Student Teachers’ Perceptions of Their Seminar Experience: A Pilot Study Exploration through Focus Groups

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“I honestly thought it was just gonna be another ‘class’ class, and it’s not. It something more.”

(Music Student Teacher, 2016)
In most colleges and universities, the student teaching seminar is understood to align and support the practicum aspects of student teaching.

- Formal observations
- Teacher Performance Assessments (edTPA, PPAT)
- Lesson plans
- Licensure/certification requirements

The purpose of the student teaching seminar is “to help students broaden their perspectives on teaching, consider the rationales underlying alternative possibilities for classrooms and pedagogy, and assess their own developing perspectives toward teaching” (p.32).

- Focus on reflection and reflective teaching
- Become critical, self-aware, and self-improving
Our Previous Research

- Seminar instructors’ perceptions of music student teaching seminar
  - Purpose, structure, and content
    - Pennsylvania (Councill, 2013)
    - Midwest (Baumgartner, 2014)
    - United States (Baumgartner & Councill, 2017)

- No known research that examines these contexts from the perspective of current student teachers
Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine music student teachers' perceptions of the student teaching seminar, specifically regarding the structure and content of the course.
Methodology

  - Focus groups are utilized to “obtain multiple views and attitudes, and often require complex negotiations of the on-going interaction processes among participants” (p.2).
  - Considering different genres (band, choir, general, string), a focus group afforded us a holistic setting to gather multiple intern perspectives.

Methodology

- **Participants:** Student teachers immersed in their student teaching practicum and the accompanying seminar

- **Research Sites:** NASM-accredited, 4-year degree granting, state universities in the Midwest where the music department was charged with leading the student teaching seminar

- **Interviews:**
  - In-person (2 interviews)
  - Virtually (1 interview)
  - Regular practice for this seminar
Methodology: Interviews

- In-person (2 interviews)
- Virtually (1 interview)
  - Regular practice for this seminar
- Approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes in length
- One researcher served as lead interviewer while the other took notes and asked follow-up questions
  - Both participated in each role
Methodology: Questions

- Thirteen prompts used in all three focus groups
  - Utilized a researcher-developed, predetermined questioning route; prompts derived from previous research
- Follow-up questions as needed
Methodology: Question Topics

- Informational/demographics (name, area of music study, internship placement type)

- Interns’ perceptions of:
  - Seminar structure
  - Seminar content
  - Methods in which they were assessed in the course
  - Experiences with other student teachers
  - Purpose of the seminar
Results: Seminar Structure

- **Meeting Frequency**
  - 2 met bi-weekly, 1 met weekly
  - “Weekly would be overkill…” vs. “…an hour and a half is not enough time.”

- **Virtual vs. In-person: Mixed Perceptions**
  - Virtual keeps interns “very, very focused.”
  - “…the technology kind of gets in the way a little bit…it’s easy for me just to mute myself and then do other things.”
  - “I hate that it’s at the end of the day because…I’m about ready to drop into a nap by noon. And then we get here at 5:00, and we’re trying to discuss intellectual things, and we’re trying to focus, and I’m sitting here going ‘I didn’t have a snack today.’”
Results: Seminar Content

- **Portfolios/Teacher Work Samples**
  - Heavy focus of seminar meeting time

- **Employment Preparation**
  - Mock interviews, résumés valuable by all

- **Classroom Management**
  - Most valuable AND needed more

- **Reflective Practice**
  - “Talking about those things with the class and then hearing what other people experienced and then realizing that you actually did those things as well, when you look back at your video, that was really helpful.”
Results: Seminar Assessment

- **Observations**
  - Lesson plans required; multiple evaluators

- **Portfolios/Teacher Work Samples**
  - Major component of the seminar (time and work)
  - Video reflections—required, yet difficult to obtain permission

- **Grades**
  - Mostly based on completion: “It’s pretty subjective.”
Results: Experience with other STs

- **Music Teacher Isolation**
  - Common theme among participants
  - “A lot of time, it gets kind of isolated [sic] being a music teacher compared to one of the core teachers.”
  - “There’s no collaboration going on with any of the other student teachers.”
  - “You don’t need to come to our meetings…” (district curriculum instructor training interns)
Results: Purpose of the Seminar

Professional Learning Community
- The seminar gives interns a “real-world view” of the profession by sharing ideas amongst other beginning teachers.

Support Group
- The word “safe” was used by many STs to describe their seminar’s purpose.
- “It’s gonna be okay. This is what we’re gonna talk about today to help you make it okay.”
- “It’s really also a net for all these things that you need or like you need to know, or you need to have done, that sometimes you don’t even know exist.”

Application of Knowledge
- “There’s such a steep learning curve in between the knowledge and the application of that knowledge in teaching music....it helps you to take a step back and look at all that knowledge that you’ve obtained...”
Discussion: Implications for MUED

▶ Virtual meetings offer challenges and rewards.
  ▶ Great for allowing placements across a wide geographic area.
  ▶ Some find it difficult to concentrate
    ▶ “it's easy for me just to mute myself and then do other things”
  ▶ Perhaps not as conducive for one-on-one feedback/advice
    ▶ “…we shut this off and I can ask them as many questions as I want that I didn't want to ask in front of anyone else.” (intern who is on-location while others are virtual)
Recommendations

Importance of a “safe” place for discussion, reflection, and advice. How can we best facilitate this?

“It's good for being able to share our experiences and ideas with each other, and kind of hear the, you know, "I'm not the only person who's had that happen to me".

Music teacher educators who lead the student teaching seminar should consider the importance of creating a community among interns. We suggest time at each seminar be set aside for student teachers to share and “vent,” supporting the perceived importance of “therapy time” described by participants in this study.
Recommendations

_How do we balance portfolio/TWS/state-mandated assessments with other topics?_

- While these assessments may take up a vast amount of time (both in and out of seminar meetings), we recommend incorporating other activities that support continued pedagogical growth and socialization into the profession.
  - Lesson planning (Conway & Hodgman, 2006), special needs instruction, reinforcement of music education methods, administrative tasks.
  - Previously mentioned as infrequently covered, but are suggested as important for continued study by both music education researchers (Baumgartner & Councill, 2017; Conway & Hodgman, 2006) and music student teachers from the present study.
Recommendations

- Importance of MUED instructing the seminar
  - Based on our prior research, at this point we strongly encourage music teacher educators to work toward having the seminar housed in the music (education) department
    - Music-specific issues for beginning teachers (may not always transfer to/from other education disciplines)
  - Seminar be taught by someone who has “a foot” in both seminar instruction and intern observation
    - So much referenced by participants in this study indicated a “gray” area in separating the student teaching experience from the seminar course.
  - Seems to be helpful to music student teachers to have another person in the seminar room who can empathize with music-specific internship experiences and facilitate meaningful conversation and problem solving.
    - “Safe space” issue; having a music mentor
Next Steps

- Our future research will compare the seminar perceptions of music student teachers at various points throughout the internship.

- Compare interns’ experiences from seminars of various structure—seminars led by instructors in music education, general education, and a combination of the two.

- Content analysis of seminar syllabi (topics, structure, activities, assessments, etc.)