

## **In search of a holistic view of the qualities of music teachers**

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### **Abstract**

The search for teacher quality has been one of the priorities in the field of educational research during the last decade. The studies about teacher quality, however, have often focused on the technical, objective and easily measurable aspects of the profession and have ignored other personal qualities that are essential for an effective practice (Day, 2002; Flores, Hilton, Klonari, Nilsen & Snoek, 2008; Korthagen, 2004). In this paper we seek to identify the qualities of music teachers in primary and secondary education by investigating the links between both dimensions through a combination of the competence and humanistic paradigms. These perspectives allowed us to ascertain a number of competences considered necessary for an effective practice and to describe a series of personal aspects which revealed themselves as being essential for the successful performance of the participating teachers. Some aspects such as the need to acknowledge and value the moral and emotional dimensions of teachers and professional self-development were evident in this study. Although each perspective focuses on different dimensions of teachers, the results reveal that a balance between both sides of the

technical and personal aspects of teachers is not only possible but necessary. The findings provide important insights for specialist music educators, teacher education programs and those who are considering a career in this field.

**Keywords:** teacher quality, professional competences, teacher identities, holistic approach, professional development.

## **Introduction**

It has become increasingly evident during the last decade that quality teaching or good teaching matters (Cochran-Smith, 2003; OCDE, 2005). The definitions used to describe teacher quality, however, are wide and unclear (Snoek *et al.*, 2009; Timmering, 2009). In our search for literature focused on the quality of teachers we were able to appreciate the existence of two very different approaches to this concept. The first relates teacher quality to certain characteristics, attributes, knowledge, skills or competences of the teachers (see Ballantyne & Packer, 2004; Leong, 1996; Rohwer & Henry, 2004; Schumacher, 2009). The second revealed an approach which defines teacher quality in terms of learning outcomes (see Yarbrough, Price & Hendel, 1994; Madsen & Geringer, 1989). This perspective, however, has been criticized for suggesting the teacher is solely responsible for the learning outcomes of their students, which has shown to be “wrongheaded” (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2000, p. 20). In this study we do not seek to establish a relationship of causality between both concepts but consider teacher quality from the

perspective of the teachers themselves.

Quality indicators have also been used with very different purposes, which has contributed to enhance the confusion and complexity that surrounds this term. While some publications emphasize the formulation of indicators of quality which can become a mechanism of control for the teaching profession, other documents highlight that the search for teacher quality should contribute to stimulate the professional development of teachers. For the purpose of this study we adopted a perspective of teacher quality which allowed teachers to grow both personally and professionally.

Aware that an active implication of teachers in the process of determining teacher quality is essential if these indicators aim to exert a real impact on their professional development (Association for Teacher Education in Europe, 2006; Flores, Hilton, Klonari, Nilsen & Snoek, 2008), this study offers a view of teacher quality defined from within the profession. It is evident that teachers are able to reveal important insights into the indicators of quality that should guide their profession. However, policymakers and others have often been the predominant voices that have decided quality indicators while teachers' opinions in relation to this issue have tended to be ignored.

Although teacher quality is a concept in which the subjective side of teachers exert a decisive role, most of the studies which have tried to define teacher quality have usually place emphasis on its technical dimension. This appears to be the case for most of the studies which define

teacher quality in terms of professional competences. Notwithstanding, these kind of studies offer a narrow and simplistic view of the reality of teaching practice. Although they are not as easy to detect and assess, there are other personal aspects that play an essential role in the effectiveness with which teachers develop their teaching identity and approach (Day, 2002; Flores *et al.*, 2008; Korthagen, 2004; Pantić & Wubbels, 2010). Becoming a good teacher is not just a question of knowing or knowing what to do; who we are, or who we think we are, also affects what we do (Olson & Einwohner, 2001; Watson, 2006). This highlights the necessity to adopt a balanced view of the quality of teachers which considers knowledge and skills, yet also values attitudes, thinking, identities and other personal aspects (Association for Teacher Education in Europe, 2006). During this study we sought to investigate the term teacher quality in relation to both the technical aspects needed to teach a subject in conjunction with other personal characteristics which are essential for an effective practice.

## **Research methods**

In order to achieve a comprehensive view in relation to teacher quality, we used a combination of quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative methodologies (narrative inquiry) to investigate the qualities of music teachers.

Building on previous research which determined the desirable competences of music teachers (Carrillo & Vilar, 2009), the first part of the study used questionnaires in order to collect the opinions of a cross section of music educators from Catalonia (Spain) in relation to three

aspects of the above-mentioned competences: the importance for the development of their professional activity, the implementation in their teaching practice and the preparation received in their initial training. The proposal of professional competences on which teachers provided their opinion in the questionnaire was based on ten competences organized under the following categories: cross-disciplinary or common to all teaching staff in primary and secondary education, music-specific and others that consider the specificity of the subject from a pedagogical and didactic standpoint. A total of 443 teachers responded to the questionnaire, almost 14% of music teachers based in Catalonia, Spain. Of the 443 participating teachers, 282 (63%) are working in primary education and 161 (37%) in secondary. The results of this study have been previously published elsewhere (Carrillo & Vilar, *in press*). Although useful to reflect on the needs which arise from their practice, this perspective provided a limited view of the qualities of music teachers which did not adequately explain the complexity of teachers' work and lives.

In order to better understand this complexity, the second part of this study examines the personal qualities and values inherent to teachers' lives and practices. For this purpose we identified the extent to which personal identity impacts on teachers' professional practices by exploring the journeys of four music educators from two different cultural contexts: two from Catalonia (Spain) and two from Queensland (Australia). Narrative inquiry methodology was utilized in order to provide important insights into the formation of each participant's professional identity. Unlike the competence-based approach, narrative inquiry provided a humanistic vision of teachers which provided important insights into their personal and professional context (see Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 150). While the competence-based approach made it possible to ascertain general criterion of quality, narrative methodology enabled the exploration of particular

qualities of each teacher which were deemed to be essential for the effective execution of their professional activity.

The second part of the study enabled a deeper exploration of these qualities and to gain access to their meaning (Polkinghorne, 1988). To state explicitly these meanings through the narratives allowed us to contextualize the subjective qualities of teachers and to gain an understanding of their implications for each teacher's practice.

## **Results and discussion**

During the previous analysis this study ascertained a number of themes which were grouped into the following categories: the moral and emotional dimensions of teaching, the difficulties associated with the management of the classroom, teachers' professional self-development, pedagogical and didactic competences, qualities and experiences in relation to music, and teachers' collaborative work. The results which are presented and discussed below, however, focus on two of the aspects which have shown to be more important for the achievement of effective practices: the need to acknowledge and value the moral and emotional dimensions of teachers and the importance of enhancing professional self-development. The contributions of each approach in relation to these themes are described and the findings are exemplified with excerpts from the narratives.

## **In relation to the moral and emotional dimensions of teaching**

The results highlight the impact of the moral and emotional dimensions of teachers in the development of their professional activity. The first part of the study showed that the most highly valued competence amongst the teachers is that relating to their ethical conduct as a teacher. This suggests that the teaching profession has implicit moral values which go beyond the most technical aspects of teaching (Marchesi, 2007). This view was supported by the narratives, which contextualized the moral values of teachers in their personal praxis. The interpersonal relationships which teachers establish with their students and the way in which these relationships determine the direction of the educational intervention make clear that the teaching activity requires from teachers a commitment with others which exceed their strictly professional responsibility.

On the other hand, and because the teaching profession is built on human relationships, the narratives reveal that the task of teaching requires high levels of emotional intelligence:

The satisfaction which comes from devoting oneself to teaching was for Marta “a fantastic motivation to keep working well”. John believed that seeing students progress had been an important factor in persisting in the profession. Because emotion is essential to identity, it is disappointing that teaching training programs do not recognize O’Connor’s (2008) assertion that this dimension of teaching frequently acts as a source of intrinsic motivation and therefore is central to teaching

effectiveness. As John revealed, “it would be good if there was a course on how to manage your own emotions in the classroom. However, the teacher’s emotions on how to deal with things like that [problems of classroom] are just forgotten”. John confessed that people tend to wrongly think that teachers “will be fine” in front of the class and fail to recognize that they are not trained to emotionally handle some classroom situations. (Carrillo, *under examination*)

The narratives also show that the rewards for good work result in positive emotions which instil in teachers a greater sense of confidence in their own expertise and contribute to their commitment towards the profession:

Tim still recalls how the words from one of his headmasters inspired him to both remain dedicated to the profession and to improve his teaching practice. Because we had also received external validation in relation to our expertise as music teachers, either through awards or feedback surveys, we recognized how being acknowledged for good work had contributed to our enthusiasm to the profession and had instilled in us a sense of confidence in our capacity as educators. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) revealed, we were aware that much of the best work is achieved through “amplify[ing] strengths rather than repair[ing] the weaknesses” (p. 8). As teachers we had experienced the benefits of receiving positive stimulus, and as such were also aware of the importance of acknowledging students for good work (Carrillo, *under examination*)



## **In relation to the professional development of teachers**

The results of this study revealed the need to foster the professional development of teachers.

Particularly, the findings from the first part highlight that, although this competence is not the most valued in relation to performance, the teachers recognize the importance of pursuing professional development either through specific actions which lead to strengthening their personal qualities or through their participation in activities which enhance their skills and expertise in the field of music education.

In the narratives included in the second part of this study the participating teachers also specified their need to implement different strategies to deal with the challenges of the profession. Aware of their limitations and/or needs, the teachers pursued different initiatives to contribute to their professional self-growth:

Despite her preparedness to “learn on the job” Marta remained painfully conscious of her lack of formal educational training. She read specialized journals and familiarized herself with textbooks as a means of augmenting her pedagogical knowledge. Marta also recognized that supervising practicum students had been crucial for her becoming interested in the acquisition of theoretical knowledge.

Likewise Carmen had sought to increase her theoretical knowledge when she began her university career by engaging in a “crash course” in educational theory.

*(Carrillo, under examination)*

Participating in activities of continuing education, recalling experiences from their past as students in the school, working collaboratively or using reflection as a means to gain knowledge were revealed as useful actions to improve the participants' expertise as teachers. Although the narratives described different strategies to enhance the professional growth of teachers, the accounts drew special attention to the learning which is gained through practice and the role of reflection as a tool which allows the awareness and appropriation of this knowledge:

Though her Diploma of Education had provided a suitable grounding, Júlia was able to build on this abstract knowledge through observation, and in doing so “really learnt to teach”. Marta, who did not receive any formal preparation for teaching, was also able to create “learning strategies or certain methods” based on her teaching needs. Without being consciously aware of it, both Júlia and Marta used reflection as a means to gain knowledge. This is consistent with Carmen's experience, for she also compensated for her perceived deficiencies as a beginning teacher using what Schön (1992, p. 35) described as “knowledge in action”. Her sense of self-efficacy was increasingly enhanced by this reflection on her teaching practice. Though articulating it quite differently, Marta is equally aware of the value of reflection. Her “pedagogical principles of common sense”, which she described as “changing an activity if necessary, rectifying what is going wrong, adapting the content to the year level or using positive responses from the students”, emulated Schön's thinking. (Carrillo, *under examination*)

## **Implications and recommendations**

Through the relationships which teachers establish with their students it has become evident that the moral and affective dimensions of teaching often act as a source of intrinsic motivation and that, as such, they determine their professional practice. The results of this study have confirmed Hargreaves (2000) contention that relationships with students are one of the main causes for satisfaction amongst teachers. In addition, the narratives have highlighted the value of positive stimulus in the motivation and the commitment of teachers towards their work. It appears that emphasizing the positive qualities of teachers contributes to the achievement of effective practices ( Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The previous section underlies the need that both teacher training programs and policy documents acknowledge the moral and affective dimensions of teachers. Notwithstanding, in day-to-day professional practice, it is important that teachers are aware of these dimensions of teaching and that schools provide an appropriate environment which facilitates the creation of such values in human relationships.

This study also highlights the need to enhance professional development in order to manage the challenges of the teaching profession. Although the participants carried out different initiatives for enhancing professional self-growth, they all appeared to have their origins in a process of self-observation and self-awareness (see Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001). Becoming more aware of who they are and what they do helped them to foster their strength and correct their mistakes and

weaknesses. The narratives also acknowledged the value of reflection on practice as a useful means to contribute to professional self-development.

While professional self-development can only be carried out by oneself, we agree with Ferguson (2009) that teacher educators can support pre-service teachers' professional growth through facilitating self-awareness. It is also important that teacher training programs provide opportunities for reflection –both during training periods at the lecture rooms and during the practicum element in schools– and thereby instil this as a habit of effective teaching.

## **Conclusions**

From the results presented above we can conclude that both perspectives used in this study achieve complementary results in relation to the need to acknowledge and value the moral and emotional dimensions of teachers and the importance of enhancing professional self-development. While the results from the first part have provided objective and general data in relation to specific aspects of the competences of teachers, the narratives from the second part have offered a subjective and particular vision of the professional lives of the participating teachers. The latest perspective has also provided data which has facilitated the contextualization and/or understanding of the complexity underlying the findings in relation to the competences of teachers.

Harmonizing the visions of these two approaches, then, has provided a perspective of the qualities of teachers which is more realistic (because it is defined from within the profession), more inclusive (as it acknowledges objective and subjective aspects), more dynamic (because it considers the particularities of each person and the temporal factors) and more contextualized (as it includes work context and its impact on teachers' practices). On the other hand, complementing both the competence and humanistic paradigms in search of a comprehensive notion of teacher quality has suggested a way to partly overcome the limitations of each of these perspectives and has facilitated access to the intrinsic complexity of the teaching task. We therefore agree with Korthagen (2004) and van Huizen, van Oers and Wubbels (2005) that a competence-approach and a personal orientation may not only complement each other but may, in addition, provide a holistic vision of the qualities of teachers.

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