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“Realities of Music Teaching: A Conversation”

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A Response

By

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Early Challenges

I was privileged to have the opportunity to teach in a very large “inner-city” public school for 20 years. It was during those formidable years in my career that I learned how to teach, understand and appreciate children with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

The Denver Public School District was a very diverse urban environment with Native Americans, Whites, Hispanics, Asians and a few African American students during the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. As a fledgling instrumental music teacher, I discovered that teaching to this population of students was a bit challenging to me as a result of my lack of experience in working with individuals coming from so many different backgrounds. I grew up in a very segregated city in Mobile, Alabama; and, I went to an all Black college (Grambling College) in Louisiana from 1964-68. So, I had never interacted or conversed with any students other than those of my own race.

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However, I discovered early that it didn't matter...kids were kids. It turned out to be one of the best experiences of my life. Second, I discovered that there was very little money to purchase music, supplies, equipment and the facilities were not ideal. Matter of fact, I taught most of my elementary classes in hallways, on stages of auditoriums, empty gymnasiums and in cafeterias. But, it didn't matter. As a new teacher, I was excited about teaching kids the art form that I had learned to love so dearly—music. I didn't let funding be an issue. My parent “booster” club helped to raise all the money we needed for our program to be successful. We sold everything from popcorn to candy bars. Those were the good old days.

I believe that I overcame many of these challenges because I went into the profession for the right reasons—a love of the music and a love for people. It was certainly not for my \$6,000 per year teaching salary. Our moderate household income was supplemented by “gigs” and my wife's teaching salary. No, the true inspiration to listen to and create music, and eventually share that passion for this art form was fueled by my first band director, Mr. Ulysses S. Miller. It was very evident to me that he knew music held a central position in the intellectual processes and culture in our lives. He knew it served to educate, inform and inspire; it gave us hope, joy and an appreciation for life and beauty on this planet.

There were no National Standards for Music Education during the 1950's to teach by. He was just an intuitively wonderful musician and educator who taught us basic skills on our instruments, and helped us acquire knowledge in theory fundamentals, performance and reading techniques, and to listen with understanding and discrimination. His expectations were high for all of us and we responded with pride. By the way, he was

able to accomplish his goals in spite of inferior materials, equipment and deplorable conditions of the band room in which we worked each day.

My point, in response to Estelle Jorgensen's paper, is that we need more dedicated, inspiring, highly-motivated and qualified music teachers like Mr. Miller if the future of our profession is to remain bright and vital in our society. Without qualified, dedicated music teachers and their students in our classrooms (especially Urban and rural environments), our goal of "music for all" can't move forward. In addition, we have to find better ways to deal with issues such as retention and revitalization to keep them in the field.

My Career Path

I totally agree with Dr. Jorgensen's statement that "teaching is conceived hierarchically from kindergarten through university, and teachers are rewarded by increased status as they move upward to a higher level of instruction..." This is the career path that I followed. It was a philosophy that my music supervisor strongly believed in and made sure that each new music teacher in his District followed that path. If you were successful at teaching instrumental music at the elementary level, he moved you to the junior high school; then, eventually to high school. This process was considered a promotion for all in our District.

My journey included employment for 16 years as an elementary, junior and high school instrumental music teacher; four years as an instrumental music supervisor for one of the largest public schools in the Nation; and almost 20 years in higher education administration. That's almost 40 years as a professional music educator, author and

administrator of performing and visual arts programs. The experiences that I received as a result of this particular path lead to my decision to focus on issues of performance practices; jazz history and pedagogy; technology; partnerships and alliances; recruitment, retention and mentoring opportunities for minority teachers and students; collaborations; community outreach programs; and, issues relating to urban arts education. And, I wouldn't change a single thing about my career choices. I don't believe that this path has taken me away from the classroom or away from music education. I believe it has better prepared me for my chosen field and has positioned me to share my experiences with students and teachers who are interested in becoming successful music educators. I didn't move from level to level being "promoted" for remuneration, but for the challenges and changes each new job brought to bear. I remain a teacher and will always be committed to sharing what I've learned over the years with my students and any teacher willing to listen and learn.

Meeting the Challenges

I think we can all agree that today's challenges to Arts Education in an Urban Environment are unprecedented. The current educational reforms, both as expressed in law and as carried out in subsequent administrative actions, have some very troubling implications for our service to American school children in this environment.

Among those topical and fiscal implications, we can all agree that one of the most troubling current problems lies in the lack of support for a dwindling supply of qualified arts educators in our schools, especially in Urban and rural areas of our country.

But we can also agree not to despair. There are strong actions that we can take to weather this storm—at least, if we take the actions together in well-structured partnerships. We can continue to inform the public and elected leaders of the ways that arts education benefits our children.

We can continue to tell decision-makers of the very real needs facing our profession as we provide those benefits to children in Urban and rural areas of the country. We can work more closely together and get much smarter about the ways that we cultivate advocates among the public.

And, we can continue to expand and refine the pre-service and in-service support we give to teachers as they work with children in these communities across our nation.

I am proud to say that our association, MENC, is at the forefront of these essential tasks in these exceptional times. And I am pleased to see that we have an expanding group of allies (all of the arts organizations) eager to both engage in dialog about our troubles and actually do something about them.