



Collaborative partnerships between institutions of higher education and independent school districts

by Donna Emmanuel

Music education programs in colleges and universities and music programs in public elementary, middle, and high schools have long been partners in spoken and unspoken ways. One of the most common relationships is that of the student-teaching experience in which undergraduate university and college students work with cooperating teachers in the public schools. This type of partnership benefits the university students in many explicit ways, but the benefits for the public school teachers and their students are not so clear.

University faculty and students also commonly use schools as sites for research, though often after the research project is over, the “partnership” ends.

Even though these types of relationships might commonly be called “partnerships,” a true partnership is one in which all parties clearly benefit and all parties share a common goal. These types of partnerships might be termed truly collaborative.

Why are these types of partnerships necessary? First of all, it is impractical to think that these two entities should work in isolation from one another when they share the same overall objective—to provide quality music education for students in the public school systems. Secondly, there is much that the participants in both settings might learn from the one another. Thirdly, in challenging times and in challenging settings, music teachers and music education programs need a strong support system, one that can help them overcome the difficulties presented by possible lack of financial, administrative, and community support.

The purpose of this article is to discuss new perspectives on the benefits of establishing ongoing relationships between public schools in urban and rural areas and university music education programs. Specifically, this article will focus on two distinct types of collaborative partnerships.

Urban and Rural Schools

Where public schools in any setting might benefit from collaborative partnerships, there are two settings in particular in which these relationships might be especially helpful. The challenges in urban and rural schools have been well documented. Teaching music in urban and rural settings has its own complex challenges that often include lack of funding, lack of materials, and lack of support.

Often educators in urban and rural settings feel a sense of isolation and inadequacy. These feelings emerge for a number of reasons, but there are three predominant factors. First, music teachers going into an urban or rural setting feel unprepared for the challenges they face. While they often feel *musically* prepared, they are not trained to handle issues that arise from the cultural differences they encounter.

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A second reason many music teachers in urban areas feel a sense of isolation is the perceived lack of support from administrators and parents. "Without the support of administrators with a special interest in music, the quality control isn't there, and a beginning teacher has no one to talk to, and so they fail on their own and quickly move on" (Renfro, 2003, p. 38). Districts without this type of administrative support find it difficult to keep exemplary music teachers and to attract new teachers to their programs.

Music teachers also perceive a lack of parental support. Not only do many parents of students in urban and rural areas not speak English, but they often do not understand how to access the system, making them apprehensive of contact with teachers.

A third reason music teachers in urban areas develop a sense of isolation is the explicit differences, both tangible and perceived, between their setting and a suburban setting. Differences in funding are typically the most visible. State budget cuts often mean a loss of music programs. In suburban school districts with viable football teams and marching bands and parents who are willing to act as advocates for music programs, these programs can often be rescued. Not so in urban areas where even more emphasis is placed on standardized testing scores, reading, and math. Lack of funding also means a lack of materials and equipment that are often taken for granted in more affluent suburban areas.

Benefits of Collaborative Partnerships

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these seemingly overwhelming issues? The benefits from such a project affect all participants involved: the public school music teacher and his or her students, as well as the university instructor and those students. There are also long-term benefits for the music programs in that district.

Collaborative projects enable the public school music teacher in an urban or rural area to overcome the sense of isolation and inadequacy that often develop. Having someone from an institution of higher education express an interest in working with a public school music teacher gives that teacher a sense of belonging to a larger musical and educative community and also a sense of respect by having their teaching knowledge and ability recognized and valued.

The public school music students benefit as well, particularly if the project involves creative activities such as improvisation and/or composition, activities that many practicing teachers are either not trained in or are reluctant to tackle in a challenging setting. Involvement in creative activities such as improvisation and composition often open cognitive and expressive doors that might otherwise remain closed. A collaborative composition project would provide just such an opportunity.

The undergraduate music education students participating in collaboration would have the opportunity to be involved in a contextual field experience working with real students in a real setting. This type of experience allows what the students have learned in methods classes to be connected to actual practice. By actually going to an urban or rural setting and working with the students there, the undergraduates might also begin to

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overcome some of their preconceived beliefs about these settings. Because many of the undergraduate music education students are from mainstream suburban settings, they have developed beliefs and attitudes about teaching in urban and rural settings that are considered typical (McDiarmid & Price, 1990). The only way to overcome these preconceptions is to give undergraduate students opportunities to see what teaching in these areas is like, and show them that while there are challenges that are specific to these schools, their beliefs about students and those students' abilities are often inaccurate. This might also result in a long-term benefit for the school district in that after seeing the reality of students' abilities to learn and achieve musically, more graduates from music education departments might be willing to work in urban areas.

If a university is interested in building "minority" enrollment, then establishing this type of collaborative partnership

which would evolve into an ongoing partnership might possibly attract more of those urban students to university programs, specifically to music education programs. The more interaction there is between university music education programs and urban public schools, the greater the possibility for these kinds of benefits.

Two Examples of Collaborative Partnerships

There are many ways that collaborative partnerships can be established and many types of partnerships. The remainder of this article will describe two specific types of partnerships.

One type of collaborative partnership would include music education undergraduate students enrolled in elementary methods course, their faculty instructor, a public school music teacher, and the elementary students in that music program. The university faculty member and the public school music teacher would work together to plan a project in which the music education undergraduates design lesson plans that focus toward a specific musical concept or topic. Two activities that are commonly excluded from music education training programs are improvisation and composition. Having all the participants focus on these two particular issues would not only increase the level of comfort and competency in teaching for improvisation and composition, but would also benefit the elementary students who typically do not have the opportunity to engage in these creative musical processes.

Initially, the university faculty member and the public school music teacher would meet several times in order to collaborate on activities and instructional sequence for improvisation and composition. During these preliminary meetings, the two instructors would share ideas and expertise, establish common goals and objectives, and develop a sense of trust. Then the university faculty member would guide the undergraduate music education students in developing lesson plans that would be appropriate for the particular group with which they would be working. The lesson plans would be shared with the elementary music teacher who would then give feedback on them so that the undergraduate students could refine them. Ideally, the university faculty member would then travel to the elementary school, along with some of the undergraduate students, and teach the first lessons under the watchful eye of the elementary music teacher. One of the goals of this experience would be for the elementary music teacher to become comfortable enough in these areas to eventually teach the lessons herself or himself and build a composition component for the curriculum.

The project would end with a culminating event in which the elementary students and their music teacher would travel to the university to participate in a jam session with the music education undergraduate students. The undergraduate students would bring in their instruments and play a standard 12-bar blues pattern while the elementary students would create a rhythm ensemble behind them. Typically, this would result in an enthusiastic and energetic group performance during which some of the elementary students could be spotlighted on percussion solos. This jam session could be videotaped so that the elementary students could view their performance at a later date. Typically, these elementary students will not have visited

the university campus before, so they would be likely to feel very special in being asked to perform with older, more accomplished musicians.

Another type of collaboration might occur between a performing ensemble at the university setting and students in local public schools. For example, at the University of North Texas, we have a number of Hispanic and Anglo students interested in participating in a mariachi ensemble. In attempting to develop a mariachi group on campus, I considered it important to include a collaborative component in the initial proposal. This ensemble is not only a performing group, but also acts as a mentor group for students, particularly Hispanic, in the local public middle and high schools. As our ensemble matures, we will begin mentorship programs in high schools initially, then expand to the middle schools. Not only can we encourage the local students to form their own ensembles, but we can also act as musical guides and instruct in instrumental and vocal techniques that are specific to mariachi. As the high school ensembles grow, it would be important to arrange for joint performances between the high school and university groups. These

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performances could take place not only in the community, but also in university performance halls, giving the public school students an opportunity to visit campus and establish a relationship that could possibly mean pursuing a degree at the university.

Mentorship can take many forms, from private vocal or instrumental instruction to leading ensemble rehearsals, to arranging for community performances, to working with the high school instrumental director, to serving as social and behavioral role models. Collaboration would also occur between the university faculty mariachi sponsor, the high school principal and instrumental directors. These three participants would collectively determine the direction the ensemble takes, the sequence of instruction, repertoire selection, as well as how membership would be organized.

It is crucially important that we continue to build ongoing, vibrant, reciprocal relationships between students and teachers in our schools in urban and rural areas and students and teachers in institutions of higher learning. These types of collaborative projects will build bridges that will begin to fill some of the gaps that exist between university music education programs and music programs in our public schools.

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