

The Place Where Theory and Practice Can Meet

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Abstract:

Recently, the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) National Executive Board (NEB) announced that beginning with the 2020 NAfME National Conference, the meetings of P–12 music education practitioners and members of the higher education community will be reunited. Prior to 2008, NAfME had traditionally provided biennial opportunities for these two different but interdependent groups to interact in a common professional development setting. The NEB decided in 2008 to change to a yearly conference model each summer in Washington, D.C.; however, this new model did not align well with the needs of the higher education community. Consequently, the NEB agreed to hold a separate biennial conference for the higher education community, which has come to be known as the NAfME Research and Teacher Education Conference.

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Article:

Recently, the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) National Executive Board (NEB) announced that beginning with the 2020 NAfME National Conference, the meetings of P–12 music education practitioners and members of the higher education community will be reunited. Prior to 2008, NAfME had traditionally provided biennial opportunities for these two different but interdependent groups to interact in a common professional development setting. The NEB decided in 2008 to change to a yearly conference model each summer in Washington, D.C.; however, this new model did not align well with the needs of the higher education community. Consequently, the NEB agreed to hold a separate biennial conference for the higher education community, which has come to be known as the NAfME Research and Teacher Education Conference.

One of the rationales that the NEB provided for the return to a combined conference model was the opportunity for the cross-pollination of ideas between P–12 in-service teachers and higher education music researchers and teacher educators. Collegiate faculty involved with music teacher education certainly recognize the collaborative nature of their relationship with P–12 practitioners. We could not be effective in our work without the cooperation of in-service teachers and their willingness to host our students in their classrooms for early field experience practica and student teaching.

However, if we are honest, we would also acknowledge that while collegiate music educators conduct research to aid in our understanding of teaching and learning in music, we are sometimes frustrated by and critical of P–12 practitioners because we perceive that they are not interested in reading research and therefore are unaware of the implications of research findings for instructional practice. They do not see the purpose and value of research in their professional lives.

On the other hand, many in-service teachers are annoyed by what they perceive to be collegiate music education faculty's lack of connection with or awareness of the challenges of the "real world" of teaching. While dealing with theoretical and philosophical concepts is fundamental to the work we do as music teacher educators and researchers, many of our P–12 colleagues are more attracted to ideas that they believe have more immediate "traction" in the classroom.

These conflicting perspectives about the capacity of research and theory to inform and improve educational practice contribute to what is often referred to as the gap between theory and practice in music education (and education in general), an issue that is distinctive in its persistence. For example, nearly 40 years ago, Carr (1980) noted that despite efforts to explain how theory is related to practice, "Nothing seems to have changed and teachers still cling to an image of theory as incomprehensible 'jargon' that has nothing to do with their everyday problems" (p. 60).

According to Carr (1980), closing the gap between theory and practice involves "improving the practical effectiveness of the theories that teachers employ in conceptualizing their own activities" (p. 66). Carr believed that, at its best, considerations of educational theory had the potential to free educators from a dependence on practices that are the result of precedent, tradition, or just plain habit, by encouraging teachers to reflect critically on the efficacy of beliefs, values, and assumptions informing their own instructional practice.

Of course, Carr's proposal for resolving the gap between theory and practice requires that teachers actually take the time to reflect critically on their instruction, and therein lies the real challenge. I have developed a premise of my own concerning the reasons why some P–12 educators may not prioritize the type of reflection on "big ideas" and questions that we hold so dear in academia. It is a premise based on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, a five-stage model illustrating a facet of his theory of motivation.

The first four stages of the model are composed of what Maslow termed *deficiency needs*. These are needs that arise due to deprivation and will motivate people to fulfill those needs when they are unmet. The fifth need is referred to as a "growth need" and stems from a desire to grow as a person as opposed to a lack of something. Because the model is hierarchical, the most basic

needs form the foundation of the model and these needs must be met before individuals will focus motivation on the higher level needs (Goble, 1970). Thus, the first four levels are—physiological, safety, love/belonging, and esteem. The fifth and highest level is self-actualization. According to Maslow (1943),

Human needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of pre-potency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need. Man [*sic*] is a perpetually wanting animal. Also no need or drive can be treated as if it were isolated or discrete; every drive is related to the state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other drives. (p. 371)

My premise is that music teachers' capacity and motivation to reflect critically on their instructional practice are related to the extent to which they are professionally self-actualized. In Maslow's hierarchy, self-actualization is the realization or fulfillment of one's talents and potentialities. I contend that when music teachers' professional talents and potentialities are consistently realized, they are more likely to take the time to critically analyze their instructional practice and entertain theories that might inform that practice. On the other hand, teachers who must carry on their work in unacceptable facilities or who have no classroom or rehearsal space to call their own, who must constantly assert the validity of their subject matter in a time of high-stakes testing, whose teaching schedules are too often based on the common planning time needs of grade-level teachers rather than the instructional needs of the music program—such teachers may be too busy simply trying to survive to be able to consider issues related to instruction other than those that are immediate.

Of course, this is only a supposition on my part (one that I hope to research some day). Obviously there may be music educators who would consider themselves to be professionally self-actualized but who nevertheless have no interest in how research might intersect with their instructional practice. Yet the fact that in 2020, the higher education and P–12 music education communities will have an opportunity to interact once again in a common conference environment places this question of the gap between theory and practice front and center. This might be the optimum time for those of us in higher education and in music teacher education specifically to consider what we might do to better communicate with our P–12 colleagues.

In a 2015 post in *Inside Higher Ed*, Andrea Zellner, then a PhD student in the Ed Psych/Ed Tech program at Michigan State University, discussed the disconnect between the research she was conducting as a graduate student and how little that research seemed to be used in the day-to-day context of her K–12 school district where she had taught. From her unique vantage point, she offered several suggestions for changes her practitioner side would like to see from those in higher education to better bridge the theory-practice gap.

1. More outlets for researchers to “translate” their research and theoretical findings into layperson's terms
2. More engaged public intellectualism that is valued by the tenure system
3. More opportunities for boundary-crossing: for experts to engage in applied practice for their fields

4. The need to cultivate curiosity and intellectual humility on both sides of the practitioner/researcher divide; we all benefit when we admit what we do not know and engage with those who might have a different perspective (Zellner, 2015)

We have already seen movement toward some of the suggestions that Zellner poses. An increasing number of academic institutions are requiring that research reflect some level of community engagement. This is an opportunity not only to foreground practical applications of research but also to invite collaborations between researchers and community members. Crossing or even eliminating some of the boundaries that separate higher education music faculty and P-12 music practitioners and focusing on what we can learn from each other could result in exchanges that could benefit both communities. My hope is that the NAFME Conference in 2020 will be an opportunity to create new paradigms for interaction and professional development for music teacher educators, music education researchers, music program leaders, and P-12 practitioners.

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