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Why Did They Leave? A Phenomenological Case Study of Secondary School Music Teacher Attrition

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore the lived experiences of music teachers who had left school music education to pursue other careers. The research questions guiding this study were:

- (a) What do participants cite as critical experiences and interactions that led to their decision to leave their secondary school music position and pursue positions outside education?
- (b) What are the benefits and challenges of their chosen current career path?

Five former music teachers each completed a written response and participated in two semi-structured interviews regarding their decision to leave their music positions. Findings indicated that these music teachers left the field due to: (a) unexpected teaching situations; (b) lack of support; (c) lack of resources; (d) lack of respect; and (e) feelings of burnout, which included their own definitions of the term. In their new jobs, participants experienced increased flexibility and noted that their challenges were minor compared to their previous positions.

There are many implications for preservice music education programs, school administrators, and music educators. Music teacher preparation programs should involve students in field experiences that involve a variety of settings, including with diverse student populations. Music teacher educators should help preservice teachers to identify the symptoms of burnout and ways to seek help from friends and mental health professionals. Additionally, they can help preservice students set healthy boundaries and role-play conversations with parents and administrators, particularly regarding extracurricular duties. Administrators can assign beginning music teachers a mentor who is also a music specialist and prioritize open dialogue about music teachers' specializations and skills when constructing classes. Music teachers can monitor their own wellbeing and seek help if they experience symptoms of burnout. They can also consider changing schools or grade levels if such a change may support their wellbeing.

Applications for Teaching

For Music Teacher Educators:

- Have preservice teachers participate in a variety of field experience settings prior to student teaching, including settings with diverse student populations.
- Help preservice teachers to imagine and design secondary general music courses that are engaging for both the students and the music teacher.
- Teach students about the symptoms and risk factors for burnout and encourage them to take time to assess and prioritize their wellbeing, as well as how to seek help.
- Help preservice music teachers to practice setting healthy boundaries with scripts and role-playing to prepare them for difficult conversations with parents or administrators, particularly regarding additional duties and their work-life balance.

For Administrators:

- Assign beginning music teachers a mentor who is also a music specialist and teaches similar grade levels.
- Be aware of how faculty refer to music specialists to avoid demeaning language.
- Prioritize open dialogue to better align the curricular needs of the students with the specializations of the music teacher.

For Inservice Music Teachers:

- Assertively express their feelings when offended by the way that colleagues refer to them.
- Monitor their wellbeing and seek help from colleagues, friends, or mental health professionals if they encounter symptoms of burnout.
- Consider changing schools or grade levels if such a change may support their wellbeing.