“Talent” Beliefs in Music Education: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?

When considering equity in music education, our aim is to address situations in which some students are denied a high-quality music education or are provided a lesser-quality education than other students. Culture, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and community type (rural, urban, or suburban) are some of the most commonly examined factors relating to issues of equity in music education. However, something much subtler can have an impact on the degree to which each of our students has access to a high-quality music education: our beliefs about our students’ musical abilities. Specifically, the belief in selective and innate “talent”—the idea that some are born with musical ability or potential while others are not—can be an obstacle to equity in music education because this belief may lead music teachers to provide inferior and even harmful music learning experiences for some students.

Existence of Talent Beliefs
Although ethnomusicological studies of various cultures have shown that the belief in selective, innate musical talent is not universal, this assumption is prevalent in Western culture. Many among the general population believe that musical ability is the result of a “natural talent” or “gift” that is present only in a subset of the population, a belief which tends to become more prominent as children get older (Asmus, 1986; Davis, 1994; Hallam & Prince, 2003). I have witnessed this belief firsthand in my own teaching. For four semesters I taught a course aimed at preparing elementary education majors to incorporate music into their future classrooms, and each semester I would hear comments from students proclaiming their lack of musical ability, such as “I have zero musical talents” or “Be kind to those of us who can’t sing, like me.” These students’ statements implied not only a belief in innate, selective musical talent but also the belief that musical ability was something they did not—and even could not—possess.

Many music educators also believe in the idea of selective, innate talent. Results of a study by Brändström (1999) suggest that, while some music teachers believe that all human beings are musical, others believe that musicality is biologically inherited and “reserved for a minority of individuals” (p. 23). Clelland (2006) also found that numerous music teachers believe that some children are not inherently musical. Results of a study I conducted (Shouldice, 2009) indicate that many music teachers agree with the statement “To be good at music, a person needs to have a talent for music;” one such teacher expressed the belief that “to be truly musical I think is a gift” (p. 148), while another stated, “Some people can’t be… ‘a musician’ because they might not have that talent” (p. 133). In a later survey of 192 elementary music teachers (Shouldice, 2012), I found that, while 97% agreed with the statement “Anyone can learn music,” 25% did not agree with the statement, “Anyone can be good at music.” Additionally, 42% agreed with or were undecided about the statement “A lack of talent makes it difficult for a person to acquire musical skills.”

Effects of Talent Beliefs
Teachers’ beliefs have an inevitable impact on what they do in the classroom with students. The beliefs of teachers may be overt and consciously influence their decisions and behaviors, but just as often they are implicit and unarticulated, guiding teachers’ actions in ways of which they may not even be aware. One significant subset of teachers’ beliefs that likely affect their classroom practice are their expectations for their students, particularly student learning and success, and the ways in which these beliefs are communicated to students. “The early school years are an important formative period when children’s beliefs about their [own] abilities are based on academic expectations and ability evaluations conveyed by their teachers” (Vartuli, 2005, p. 77).

Music teachers’ beliefs about their students’ musical abilities—particularly their judgments
of whether they believe students are “talented” or not—can be communicated to students in subtle (and not so subtle) ways and can have a negative impact on students’ perceptions of their own musicality. Specifically, the distinctions a music teacher makes between “musical” and “unmusical” students can adversely affect the musical identities of the students who sense that the teacher does not believe they are “talented” (Lamont, 2002). Numerous research studies tell the stories of people who were devastated as children when a teacher told them they were tone-deaf, asked them not to sing, or denied them opportunities to participate in music due to a perceived lack of musical ability or “talent” (Abril, 2007; Burnard, 2003; Ruddock & Leong, 2005; Ruddock, 2012; Whidden, 2008, 2010).

For some individuals, these judgments of a lack of musical ability were explicit, as in the case of one person who recalled, When I was 11-years-old I was told I was tone deaf by my music teacher. I stopped playing the recorder and singing. I stopped singing in front of others altogether. I lost any musical confidence I may have had early on in my school life. (Burnard, 2003, pp. 32-33).

For others, these judgments were much more subtle, as was the case for a person who explained, “I first realized that I couldn’t sing when I was never picked for singing at school” (Ruddock, 2012, p. 215). Similarly, another remembered when she didn’t make the cut to be in sixth grade choir: “I quit singing after that because I figured all these people must be right about me—my music teacher was the expert” (Abril, 2007, p. 6). Regardless of whether the judgment was overt or subtle, most of these individuals gave up on their hopes of ever participating in music and ceased all music making in their lives because they believed they lacked musical ability and thus were “unmusical,” in large part as a result of the beliefs of their music teachers. When describing her negative childhood experiences with music, one woman aptly explained, “I don’t think [music] teachers realize the great impact they have” (Abril, 2007, p. 10).

Beliefs as Self-fulfilling Prophecies
Teachers’ beliefs about their students’ abilities may act as “self-fulfilling prophecies.” This was the subject of a research study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), in which a group of elementary teachers were given a list of students who had been identified as “late bloomers” “most likely to show an academic spurt” in the upcoming school year (p. 66). Although those students had been secretly chosen at random, they showed significantly greater gains in academic achievement than the other students at the end of the school year, suggesting that the teachers’ belief that these students would make great gains caused them to interact with the students in a way that actually made it so.

Similarly, music teachers’ beliefs about students’ musical abilities can affect how they interact with them. If a music teacher perceives a student as having musical “talent,” he or she likely will provide that student with support, encouragement, and opportunities that challenge the student and further develop his or her musical abilities. However, “self-fulfilling beliefs about the consequences of an innate gift being present are inevitably coupled with self-fulfilling beliefs about the outcome of a person lacking such a gift” (Sloboda, Davidson, & Howe, 1994). If a music teacher believes some students lack musical “talent,” he or she may fail to provide them with the same high-quality music learning opportunities and encouragement.

Beliefs in musical talent that result in judgments made about whether a student is “musical” or “unmusical” are an issue of equity when they function in a way that limits the musical potential and thus the musical future of any of our students. The segregation of students into the “talented” elite and the “untalented” masses is “equivalent to labeling an individual’s musical ability based on color of skin, sex or birthplace” (Whidden, 2008, p. 12) and “creates images of musical participation for the very few” (Campbell, 2010, p. 217). However, it is our duty as music educators to provide ALL students with a music education that not only will help them develop musical skills and understanding to the greatest extent possible but, in doing so, will enable and empower them to go on to a lifetime of musical engagement. Only when we see each and every one of our students as “reachable, teachable, and worthy of the attention and effort it takes to help them learn” (Vartuli, 2005, p. 77) can we hope to provide them all with an equitable music education.

References


Heather N. Shouldice, Assistant Professor of Music Education at Eastern Michigan University, teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in music education and supervises student teachers. Prior to her appointment at EMU, Shouldice was a doctoral teaching assistant at Michigan State University, where she taught introduction to music education and elementary music methods courses. While at MSU, she was a recipient of MSU’s prestigious Excellence-in-Teaching Citation and also was awarded a Leadership Endowment Fellowship from the MSU Council of Graduate Students and a Dissertation Completion Fellowship from the MSU Graduate School.

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