# Specialist vs. Non-Specialist Music Teachers:

# Creating a Space for Conversation

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This article shares an ongoing conversation between two elementary music teacher educators. The discussion includes an exchange of ideas surrounding the issue of specialist and non-specialist music teachers in Canadian elementary schools. It is hoped that this glimpse into our dialogue will provide others across the country with the impetus to jump into the debate, thereby providing discourse that could create new and enriched meanings for addressing the challenges of elementary music teaching.

## Our Conversation

Amanda: Shelley, we have been invited to present at a Symposium on *Music Education in Canada: What is the State of the Art?* at the University of Western Ontario at the end of May.

Shelley: Great! What is our topic?

Amanda: The organizers want us to tackle the issue of specialist vs. non-specialist music teachers in Canadian elementary schools.

Shelley: Okay, that sounds fine, but do you think there is really enough to talk about on this topic for a whole session? After all, in Prince Edward Island where I'm

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from, we have a music specialist teaching music in every elementary school. I don't see any of this as a big problem.

Amanda: Well, from your perspective you might be right. Atlantic Canada is a region in our country where music specialists have traditionally played an important role in teaching children music in the elementary grades. Students in Western Canada have not benefited from much of this kind of expertise for a long time and there are many challenges as a result.

Shelley: Yes, I see what you mean.

Amanda: I guess the first question we need to sort out is a definition for *music specialist.* Any ideas on how we would do this?

Shelley: Yes, but this may be a tough one. It seems that people have differing ideas as to what a specialist means. Most look at the music and educational background of the teacher, but this can present points of tension about adequate qualifications. For example, is a specialist someone with a Bachelor of Music degree? That person may be highly skilled as a performer but not necessarily have pedagogical skills in teaching music. The same could be said about a person who has their A.R.C.T. from the Royal Conservatory of Music. S/he would also be an excellent musician but not necessarily know anything about teaching classroom music in Grades K-6. So, does a person need to have a B.Mus.Ed. degree or a B.Ed. degree where there are appropriate music education courses? Or, could a series of weekend workshops in Orff or Kodály do the trick?

Amanda: That is an interesting dilemma. For purposes of our discussion, however, why don't we think of the term *specialist* as being defined solely based upon teaching assignment? That would mean an *elementary music specialist* is a certified

teacher whose main assignment in the elementary school is teaching several grade levels of classroom music. Such a person would most likely have taken some university level music and music education classes, but let's not be specific here.

Shelley: Okay, so then, we would say that the definition of a *non-specialist* is a certified *elementary classroom teacher* who teaches music to his/her own class. In most cases, we can assume this person would have little, if any university level music and/or music education background.

Amanda: Sounds good. I think those are workable definitions we can use to sort out the issues here.

Shelley: How many music specialists, defined in this way, would you say actually teach in elementary schools in Canada?

Amanda: I hesitate to guess. Why don't we make a few phone calls across the country to talk with colleagues and gather their current impressions on numbers? We can also ask them about music teacher education for pre-service elementary teachers in their provinces and start thinking about how the issue impacts in this direction.

Shelley: Sounds good.

**A few days later. . . . . .**

Shelley: Amanda, I had an opportunity to speak to a variety of provincial consultants and university colleagues in the eastern part of Canada. Although the conversations did not represent inclusive findings of all programs within each province, I found it really interesting that they did offer insight into the specialist and non-specialist debate.

Amanda: What did you find out?

Shelley: Based upon the impressions shared, it became clear that moving east from Ontario, the percentage of specialists teaching elementary music increased substantially. The Atlantic provinces, in particular, appeared to have quite high numbers of elementary music specialists. In fact, it was suggested that 90% and higher of the music instruction in the elementary grades is taught by specialists. Other than some places in New Brunswick, this would indicate that 10% or less of elementary children would be receiving classroom music from a non-specialist. What did you find? Did you get similar impressions in the West?

Amanda: Unfortunately, I found the opposite to be true. Contrary to what you found, moving west from Ontario, the estimated percentage of specialists teaching elementary music declined substantially to as low as approximately 30%. This would indicate that there are many instances in Western Canada and Ontario where 70% of the elementary school children are receiving music instruction from a non-specialist.

Shelley: Wow, are you serious?

Amanda: I am. You know, Shelley, these statistics cause great concern for those of us in the profession who have long advocated for elementary music specialists. Yet, interestingly enough, these current 2005 impressions are quite consistent with those from over the past 25 years. This would imply that as a profession, we have not been as successful as we might like to believe in increasing the number of music specialists offering instruction in elementary schools in Canada. In fact, I just read about research completed by the People for Education, an Ontario lobby group. The study revealed that

the number of elementary schools in Ontario with specialist teachers has dropped by almost a third since 1997-98 (Taylor, 2005).

Shelley: I can see this is a dilemma. I guess we do have lots to talk about. So, where to from here?

Amanda: Well, faced with the present reality that there are very few elementary music specialists in the vast majority of the country, it would seem appropriate for us to consider what the non-specialist music teacher can offer elementary school children. After all, in the province of Alberta alone, there were 254, 875 children enrolled in the elementary grades in 2004-05 (Government of Alberta, 2005). If 70% of these children were instructed by a non-specialist, that means that approximately 178, 000 children could have participated in classroom music in this way.

Shelley: Yes, we probably need to be proactive and look ahead to how non-specialist teachers can be supported, both at the pre-service and in-service levels. Otherwise, hundreds of thousands of elementary school-aged children in Canada will be neglected while we put all our professional energies towards advocating for future elementary music specialists.

Amanda: So, why do you think we have advocated so passionately for specialists all these years, anyway?

Shelley: Assuming that a specialist does have musical background and post-secondary music education, such a teacher provides musical expertise that can lead children towards musical understanding. We know such musical independence comes in part, from achieving a sense of musical literacy, and only a music specialist has the comfort level to facilitate children's growth in this direction (Montgomery, 2002).

Amanda: Yes, and the specialist teacher also brings strength in guiding children within a performance-based education which has traditionally played a large role in many Canadian music education programs. Elementary music programs across the country offer participation in a variety of ensembles, concerts, and performances that could be very difficult for the non-specialist to duplicate.

Shelley: Do you mean musical groups such as children's choir, recorder ensembles, Orff ensembles, and beginning band?

Amanda: Yes, and it would seem logical that the best suited instruction for such ensembles would be guided by a specialist who has the experience and expertise to lead children towards becoming true music makers and thinkers.

Shelley: So what about the non-specialist? How can the non-specialist lead children in the performance expectations that are such an integral part of many Canadian schools? What could the non-specialist have to offer?

Amanda: I don't know, it is much more difficult to find the strengths of the non-specialists. However, since so many children in Western Canada and Ontario receive their classroom music instruction from such individuals, we have to look at what this means for kids.

Shelley: Perhaps since the non-specialist gets to know approximately 30 children on a regular daily basis, s/he would have a greater advantage in building ongoing relationships throughout the year with the students. I guess the non-specialist would also have the ability to be able to use music everyday in the classroom and therefore, could intelligently integrate music into other subject areas. S/he can offer insight into the entire curricula since instruction would be occurring across multiple subject areas.

Amanda: The focus of instruction, however, could only be on developing musical understanding at one grade level as opposed to nurturing long-term musical growth. If an elementary school principal expects the generalist classroom teachers to provide music instruction in his/her school, there is no guarantee that the children will receive consistent musical attention from one year to the next. Thus, there is a greater potential for an unevenness of instruction over several grade levels.

Shelley: This whole topic of conversation makes me think about the undergraduate students I have been teaching in my non-specialist elementary music education classes here at the University of Alberta. The majority of these students do not come into the course with a musical background and yet, will have a 70% chance at some point in their career of needing to teach elementary school children music.

Amanda: You're right, and they are absolutely shocked when they hear that this is a realistic possibility. It is very scary for many of them. One of my students recently said:

> I have always had a fear of music for the simple fact that it is an unknown to me. I was forced to play piano and ended up quitting because I couldn't grasp the theory and because I have no ear for music. I can't imagine teaching anything as intimidating as music to kids. (Anonymous, personal class comment, October 2004)

Shelley: Yes, and I had one student who recently asked, "Are good intentions necessarily enough to provide a structurally sound program for students?" (Anonymous, personal class comment, June 2005). This is a huge question. A student may be highly

motivated and have great planning skills but not be competent in the subject matter. Is that enough to carry a teacher along? It certainly made me stop and reflect. What are your thoughts?

Amanda: Well, some of the research that has been conducted over the last 25 years on the specialist vs. non-specialist topic reinforces your thoughts on this. For example, Byo (2000) reports that many researchers have found that " a teacher's level of subject matter competence is the prime predictor of student learning" (p. 31). In elementary classroom music, this may in part, be due to the finding that some non-specialists actually teach less than the officially allotted time for music instruction, citing lack of content knowledge and comfort level with children's music instruction (Amen, 1984; Bresler, 1993; Byo, 2000; and Propst, 2003). In a sense, this puts children's musical understanding ". . . at the mercy of an individual teacher's psychological comfort regarding music" (Montgomery, 2000, p. 128). In addition, some research on elementary music teacher education has revealed a lack of congruency between what non-specialist teachers perceive as necessary skills and knowledge for teaching children music in the elementary grades and what is taught in undergraduate music education pedagogy classes. Thus, there may at times be a disconnect between what the university thinks is valuable pre-service content and what teachers in the field believe is important for successful teaching (Krehbiel, 1990; Montgomery, 1995). Morin (1995), on the other hand, determined that pre-service courses can have a positive affect on non-specialists' attitudes about teaching so that is encouraging to consider.

Shelley: Well, Amanda, how do you think we can move forward?

Amanda: Certainly, an immediate avenue to affect change is at the level of teacher education. If we can do a better job at assisting our pre-service non-specialist elementary teachers in preparing for music teaching, then we may be able to empower them to work through some of the challenges. This could inevitably affect the music education of many children across Canada. I do believe we are already doing a tremendous job in music teacher education for our elementary music specialists so perhaps we should consider placing the majority of our professional energies towards enhancing the university level music education of these non-specialist elementary teachers. Canadian children, especially in the West and Ontario deserve our passionate attention in this regard!

Shelley: Well, what about advocating for more music specialists across the country? Do you think we should stop doing this?

Amanda: No, most definitely not. However, I think we have to spend more time working on enhancing the music teaching of non-specialists by improving music teacher education. At the same time, we of course must continue to lobby governments regarding the wisdom of employing more music specialists.

Shelley: Well, I'm exhausted just thinking about it. . . In regards to music teacher education, what is happening across Canada? How much education are pre-service generalist elementary teachers actually receiving in supporting children's musical learning?

Amanda: Not surprisingly, it varies quite dramatically across the country. There is as much deviation in instructional time as *no* hours of instruction in elementary music at some universities to *full-year* courses at others. For example, one university in Eastern

Canada requires no music education courses of their elementary education majors while another university in Ontario requires 12 hours of instruction in elementary music for non-specialists. Three universities in Western Canada vary since one requires no course of this type, another offers a semester long course (39 hours), while a third offers a full-year course. There seems to be no consistent standard across the country.

Shelley: And, of course, I imagine there is just as much diversity in the course content as there is in the amount of instructional time offered. The content must look quite different from place to place. Some universities have a greater focus on pedagogy while others simply concentrate on musicianship. That also affects the competencies that teachers bring with them into the elementary classroom.

Amanda: Yes, absolutely.

Shelley: And, what about all the other factors that affect these university courses?

Amanda: Such as . . . ?

Shelley: If you think about some of the external pressures, there are tension points that the university professor must face in the midst of decision making on undergraduate course content. In a sense, these are external pressure points that push against our better curricular instincts. For example, one is teacher licensing. In many provinces, teaching music is not stated as part of the license. So, teachers are certified as "teachers" not necessarily "music teachers". This suggests that an elementary teacher should be able to teach anything and that specialist courses in music education are not necessary. Indeed, university curriculum committees sometimes pressure their instructors into cutting corners on instructional time with non-specialist elementary music education courses in order to make more room for other, more "critical" pedagogy courses. This can severely

affect the amount of contact time we have with our students whether we think this is appropriate or not.

Amanda: Speaking of pressure points, I guess another one of these is the elementary music curriculum document. These are vastly different from province to province. By in large though, the majority of the documents are designed to be taught by music specialists.

Shelley: Well, that makes it very complicated when non-specialists are trying to teach a program that is designed for a specialist. I mean, some of the language surrounding the instruction of music would be so foreign to them. If they don't understand it themselves, how can they be expected to guide students toward musical understanding?

Amanda: I don't know. For example, at the University of Alberta, we believe we have an obligation to help pre-service teachers learn how to use their official provincial curriculum document. Yet, it is too complicated for most non-specialists to begin to make any sense of as a guiding tool for teaching. This is a real dilemma when it comes time to plan content for their non-specialist elementary music education class.

Shelley: So, do you think there should be two separate documents, one for a specialist and one for a non-specialist?

Amanda: That might be one solution, but that could imply that we agree with the philosophical idea that it is okay for the generalist teacher to offer a different music curriculum to children in the schools than a music specialist. I'm not ready to go there yet.

Shelley: Well, as a profession of music educators, perhaps one thing we might do is begin to heighten our awareness regarding the larger impact of this whole debate. Are we really hearing the voices of Canadian children?

Amanda: I agree. We are often so caught up in the discourse about teacher education that we leave little time to reflect upon the children who are engaged in musical learning in all our Canadian classrooms. In relation to this, I have noticed that as a profession, we often don't share the same language within our conversations.

Shelley: What do you mean by that?

Amanda: Well, when one teaches music education in a Faculty of Music, there is a tendency to focus conversation around the discipline itself. That makes real sense given the context. However, if you teach music education in a Faculty of Education, your concerns are more directed towards how children's musical learning situates itself within the whole context of elementary education. This spins the debate from a different angle.

Shelley: Can you elaborate further?

Amanda: Well, clearly, the goal for both groups is enriched musical learning for children in Canadian elementary schools. Yet, our independent focuses lead us towards that goal from different directions.

Shelley: In a sense, it's almost as if we are traveling on two different pathways. Somehow, we need to find a meeting place so we can make sure our energies are working in partnership.

Amanda: I agree. As a profession, we need to reflect seriously about the content of our non-specialists' elementary music education courses. They simply can't be watered down versions of the specialists' course. We need to help these students begin to

establish a comfort level of musicianship that will carry them positively into their future classrooms. Little has been studied in relation to how such students form a musical identity and as Russell (1996) suggests, we need to reflect on this process more deeply. At the same time, we need to help our non-specialist students learn about a variety of pedagogical strategies that can be used to support children's musical learning. This is not an easy task when university instructional time is limited.

Shelley: Yes, you are right. Perhaps what we need is a national symposium on elementary music teacher education where we gather together educators from across the country to share ideas in this regard. I'm sure the conversation would be lively and interesting.

Amanda: I think that is a terrific idea. There is a great deal we can learn from each other in a serious exchange of ideas in this direction.

Shelley: When would you see us getting together?

Amanda: I would hope we could do this in the near future as our efforts in this regards could have immediate benefit for children. Let's throw out the challenge and see if one of our colleagues is willing to host such an event. . .

Shelley: Yes, and let's hope, meanwhile, that the conversation continues in a lively debate across the country. Certainly, our Canadian children deserve nothing less.

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