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Margaret Schmidt¹

Forum:² Reflections on a String Educator's Journey

Abstract

This paper was presented upon receiving the Outstanding String Researcher award at the 2015 ASTA National Conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. It offers reflections on one string educator's ongoing work as a person who helps children learn to play string instruments, who helps teachers learn to teach string instruments, and who studies teaching and learning. The author traces those pivotal events and key influences in her life, inviting readers to consider similar turning points in their own lives, and to continue adding to the collective stories of the profession.

Keywords

string education, music teacher education, life history

I am truly humbled to receive this award. When I started teaching, I would meet people who had been teaching for 30 or 35 years, and wonder how they did it. It seems that you just do your job, day after day, making the best choices you can about how to spend your time, and suddenly you're no longer one of the youngest in the profession. You go to conferences and you realize you actually do know lots of people there; you continue to learn about their work, and they inspire you to keep doing your job. Then just as suddenly, you discover that being "middle-aged" feels amazingly young, and somehow, AARP just *knows* that you're nearing your fiftieth birthday and sends you a membership card.

When John Geringer told me I would be receiving this award, I started thinking about the ways the world has changed during my career as a string teacher. So I hope you'll indulge me as I look back at three aspects of my work:

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² This Forum article is based on the address presented by the author as the recipient of the 2015 *String Research Award* at the ASTA National Conference in Salt Lake City, Utah.

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as someone who helps children learn to play string instruments, as someone who helps teachers learn to teach string instruments, and as someone who studies teaching and learning. As I do so, I hope you'll reflect along with me on the people and experiences that have helped bring *you* to where you are today.

Beginnings

I vividly remember arriving at the beginning of my senior year of college and thinking, "What if I don't like student teaching? Then what will I do?" I didn't remember ever consciously choosing to major in music education. I didn't really even make a conscious choice to play the violin. My parents and my best friend's parents took us to the instrument try-out night at the end of fourth grade. I thought I wanted to play the clarinet, but my hands were too small. I was really torn between the violin and flute, but my best friend wanted me to hurry with my decision so she could go home. I ended up choosing the violin, just because she picked the cello. She dropped out in ninth grade, and here I am today.

That summer, my parents rented a violin and bought the music I needed to begin classes. I was fortunate to grow up in a university town, with a strong string program. Our string teacher travelled to all nine elementary schools and two junior highs, and was very dedicated to our advancement. We had All-City Orchestra once a week after school in fifth and sixth grade, and every Saturday morning in junior high. Our teacher organized chamber ensembles for us, and we enjoyed practicing and goofing around on the weekends as we prepared for solo-ensemble festivals and other events.

As for developing a love of teaching, by junior high, I was leading songs every morning at Girl Scout Day Camp with the younger girls. I was one of those people-pleasing kids, who would rather die than to not do what an adult asked me to do. At day camp, I learned that not all learners were like me—even with my careful instruction, some of the younger girls wouldn't do what I told them, and I puzzled about why that might be.

My father, a university physics professor, had a sabbatical during my junior year of high school. We moved to Madison, Wisconsin, and I suspect that set me on the path to a teaching career. My high school orchestra was directed by the amazingly patient Tom Buchhauser—we called him "Mr. B." and we teased him mercilessly. I have been paid back many times over for all the rehearsals my friends and I giggled through. I also got to play in the Wisconsin Youth Symphony under Dr. Marvin Rabin, truly one of the unsung heroes of string education (Moss, 2014). Our high school was just a few years old, and offered courses on a modular schedule, which meant we had unscheduled blocks of time during the day to study or work on independent projects. The junior high orchestra met in the high school orchestra room, so Mr. B. invited me to come during some of my free time to tutor some of the younger students. Their orchestra was working on an arrangement of "Russian Sailors Dance," and I

loved playing that cello part, so Mr. B. helped me learn to play the cello. He also arranged for me to have my first paying private student, a fifth grade boy in my neighborhood. Through Mr. B.'s encouragement, I discovered that I really enjoyed teaching strings to younger children.

Even with all these experiences, I simply do not remember choosing to major in music education—it just seemed that everyone assumed I would do that, including myself. My parents took me to visit colleges, my private violin teacher helped me prepare for auditions, and I chose to attend Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. The Conservatory was much smaller then than it is now and, as a big fish in a very small pond, I had a lot of opportunities to play great orchestral and chamber music. To my immense relief, when I started student teaching, I discovered I really liked it but, although I have photos in an album to document that experience, I remember very few details beyond finding out that the students seemed to like me.

My First Job

I have no memory at all of how we learned about open jobs in the days well before the Internet. I suspect we had to go to the college placement office and look through paper postings, copy the information by hand—no readily-available Xerox machines either—and use our manual or electric typewriters to write letters of application, which we mailed in neatly addressed envelopes with the appropriate postage affixed. I applied for several jobs in Minnesota, and took my first solo road trip to interview for three of them. By early July, I was offered a position teaching elementary strings in Austin, MN, for a real salary of \$7,800 a year.

I often wonder where I would be today had I had a different first job. The music department for the Austin Public Schools was a close-knit group. Everyone attended everyone else's concerts, and someone would usually host a very Scandinavian-style gathering afterwards, with cake and coffee (black, of course). My colleagues were available any time I needed advice, but they stayed out of the way until I asked. The junior and senior high orchestra teachers, as well as several of the local studio instructors, were especially supportive, and we made a great team.

I learned volumes in those first years of teaching, and began to develop some of the questions that have fascinated me ever since. Why did some kids seem to learn so easily, while others struggled to get their fingers to go down correctly to play "Hot Cross Buns"? Why did I do so many things wrong as a teacher? For my first concert, I had the fifth and sixth graders come to the high school an hour and a half before concert time. Not surprisingly, they were really squirrely by the time we began the concert. We played all our songs, and I gestured for the students to stand to bow—they looked at me blankly. Who would have guessed that I needed to teach them to bow? I looked at the clock. The concert had taken