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Personal Statement

My time spent at Teachers College has truly been a transformative experience- crucial in guiding me to become the teacher I was meant to be. Throughout these two years, my philosophy of pedagogy has shifted from a traditional model of teaching to an unrestricted and inspiring view of music education. The knowledge I have gained here has been immense and shaped the way I learn and teach music.

The experiential learning that took place during my studies have shown me first hand the successes of alternative music classes. The growth that I exhibited as an educator has been credited to the way my classes were run; I participated in classes that were structured much differently than anything I had seen before. One of the lessons in Creativity and Problem Solving taught by Dr. Randall Allsup, was spent solely listening to music with similar themes yet very different genres- I believed it to be one of the most intense musical experiences I have ever had in a music class. Also, being able to see democratic education in action and taking control of my own learning showed me how influential freedom is in classrooms. In my Comprehensive Musicianship class led by Dr. Lori Custodero, I was able to tailor the classes and assignments to my own interests. We had an impromptu lesson based on pi day, in which explored music that had circular motifs. The culmination of the class was marked by an essay I wrote comparing music of Western Classical and Hip Hop culture. Having that freedom in class allowed me to be much more invested in my education and it allowed me to see how students can be more engaged if they have the same amount of freedom.

During Creativity and Problem Solving, my eyes were opened to new methods of teaching music aside from the typical large ensemble setup. In David Williams's article, Elephant in the Room (2011), he calls the large ensemble (band or orchestra) an outdated model and I have to agree. He explains that this model was created long ago when this was the only way we listened to music, but now that our musical ensembles have changed, educators should keep up with the times. When we or our students go to a concert, we rarely see large ensembles (unless it is a classical or big band performance); we usually see as little as one, or two, or four people playing together. Why, then, are we expecting our students to come to school and play in a setting that is not common anymore? Before I started my classes at Teachers College, I pictured a program with talented students participating in orchestra, wind ensemble, marching band, jazz band, music theory class, music history, you name it. But now I have a altered picture of my music classes which will allow my students to explore music and challenge themselves musically in a safe and open environment.

Williams also explains in his article that in large ensembles, it is easier for students to lay out or cover up worse players. It goes without saying that this does not teach students anything and is detrimental to young musicians. The large ensemble ends up just being a replacement for actual teaching, while the chamber ensemble or garage band set up could really teach some important musical qualities. But it is so important to learn how to play with others while still being accountable for your own performance. The garage band performances from the creativity class showed me that this setup creates an open musical environment while still teaching valuable skills on how to perform with others. I learned how to improvise, learned how to play many genres on my primary instrument, and attempted instruments I would not normally try. If students did this at a younger age, their knowledge of music would probably be significantly increased compared to playing in a large ensemble for years. Why must music class be separate from the music we hear in the “real world”? We can't blame students for not being engaged, if their classes are not relatable.

In addition to employing smaller ensembles in the classroom, I have always felt that implementing popular music in the class could be a powerful tool to engage and relate to students. The classes I have taken at Teachers College have validated my views on the importance of popular music in academia. By including popular music in my curricula, my students will be given an opportunity to showcase their knowledge and express their interests. Many of the articles I have read during the creativity class have addressed this issue of popular music in the music classroom, although this is not to discredit the power of music of different cultures. I believe that we have the ability to not only allow our students to study popular music but also expose them to the classics and music of other cultures. There is a place for all of these musical styles in music education and I intend to expose my students (and myself) to as much of it as I can.

The experiential learning I gained from my classes reframed the way I wanted to teach, but I grew immensely musically and professionally during the observations and student teaching. I had so many positive moments that influenced my learning process in both teaching and musicianship. During one of my observations, I met an educator who also identified as a musician. He stressed the importance of maintaining musical skill through daily instrument practice: his prep periods were spent doing warm ups and practicing and he did his prep work at home. After seeing his dedication to his students and his craft, I was inspired to continue playing the French Horn. I took lessons with a doctoral student, Meryl Sole, and learned new tricks and tips I eventually employed when I taught high school band. During my high school teaching experience, I was struck by how little I knew of teaching band instruments and music. My cooperating teacher, Sharon Slote, was extremely patient and helpful in my first teaching experience. She also stressed the importance of performing and suggested I join an ensemble: I am currently in a brass quintet and the Mannes Community Orchestra which I use as a frame of reference for rehearsal strategies, conducting, and performing.

Much like my musicianship, my teaching has vastly improved in the past year. In my first semester, I was very aware that my teaching needed improvement; I was too focused on the actual application of teaching to even think about the theories presented in my classes during teaching. I could not be completely mindful of my teaching if I did not know the mechanics of the clarinet or what position a certain note was on the trombone. Much of my first student teaching placement was spent learning instruments, reading new band repertoire, and learning what was needed to teach band to secondary students. By my second student teaching placement, I was much more comfortable with my pacing, my style of teaching, and my rapport with students. Teaching the musical content to elementary students was not as challenging as my first placement, but learning to manage behavior and run smooth transitions was my initial challenge. Luckily, my cooperating teacher, Kate Phillips, had so many songs and tricks for students to behave. I also became very aware of the classroom environment: the classroom was very inviting and provided differentiation for many learners. Teaching at elementary, middle, and high school grade levels allowed me to see what I would like to implement in my future classes, what strategies work for specific grades or students, and the practical application of my musical knowledge in class. I have grown so much from my student teaching placements and I owe it all to the help I received from both of my cooperating teachers. I hope and plan to continue learning from my teaching experiences and make similar strides throughout my career.

I believe that music education should be a fun and fruitful experience, it allows students to learn many skills and not just the ability to play a musical instrument. The purpose of music education is not just to conduct and rehearse, but to provide students the opportunity to engage in musical experiences. Throughout my time at Teachers College, I have been challenged to see all the ways in which I can create lessons that will challenge my students and provide them with the best education. Recently, Dr. Janice Smith spoke during Student Seminar; she posed the question: “do you teach content or do you teach people?” This quote resonated with me because although we teach music, we are teaching people- our students, much more than just music. I will hold that philosophy when I embark on my professional journey as a music educator.