

THE PROFILE OF THE MUSIC TEACHER IN SPANISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS, ACCORDING TO THE TEACHERS THEMSELVES

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In spite of music teachers themselves in Spain being the ones who evaluate who is qualified to teach music in elementary schools, their opinions are not taken into account by the administration. The research herein tries to understand what points of view they hold in making their selection through a qualitative design adapted to the specific competitive process to hire civil servant teachers for Spanish public schools. The study includes non structured interviews with teachers participating in examination boards, where themes related to the desired pedagogical and musical competencies arise, as well as an evaluation of the training itineraries. It is important to hear the teachers' voice in view of the imminent convergence of the Spanish university curricula with the European Union, and therefore subsequent studies are proposed.

Need for the study

Music was included in the Spanish primary education curriculum for the first time in 1990, and since 1991 has been taught by specialised teachers. While the training of primary music teachers in other countries is carried out in music education departments integrated within advanced institutions of music –autonomous conservatories or university music departments– in Spain the training is done in separate institutions. Between these two institutions there is no coordination: the conservatory is responsible for the musical training, and the teachers colleges –or schools of education– offer a three-year degree called “Primary Teacher with Specialisation in Music Education”. The universities determine, through the subjects they offer, which competencies a future music teacher must develop, but with two important restrictions: first, legal regulations limit specific music subjects to a third of the total, and second, music education departments are not allowed to administer a music entrance exam.

I will discuss neither what circumstances led to this method of training (see, for example, ORIOL, 1988) nor how these studies were organised in teachers' colleges (see, for example, SUSTAETA and ORIOL, 1996) or the reasons for the ancestral divorce between music and university in Spain (see, for example, TÉLLEZ, 1997). Instead, I will examine the profile of today's music teacher, a decade after becoming integrated within the faculty of public schools. On one hand, the answer to these questions can help us to understand the present situation of music education in Spanish schools. On the other hand, the understanding of this profile's conflicts can prove essential towards redefining the curriculum, enlightening the process of convergence of the Spanish university degrees with those of the European Union that will take place soon.

The research design

There is another characteristic nature that requires a specific research design: the selection process for teaching in public schools. In other countries the selection is done by the school administrator, by the school district or by staff selection experts. In Spain, in the competitive exams to hire a teacher “for life” –referred to as “oposición”– the selection is carried out nowadays by the practicing teachers themselves. Examination boards are made up of five teachers specialising in the particular discipline, generally chosen at random or –as some younger teachers mentioned– who have asked to become members to experience from a different perspective the process they had undergone some years before. The process –whose exams are public– guarantees great transparency because the examiners can influence deciding who joins –or doesn’t join– the primary teachers’ corps, but cannot influence a specific posting, that is to say, where they will work. In this way, the influence of vested interests –which of course can affect other competitive exams– is eliminated.

Only graduated “primary teachers” of any speciality, not necessarily music education, may participate in these competitive exams, but not people holding academically superior degrees (a B.A. or a Ph.D. in Music or Music Education) without having studied in a primary teachers college.

There are three rounds of qualifying exams:

- In the first round, the candidates write an explanation of two themes, taken at random from an official syllabus: one related to music and music education, and the other related to educational regulations and pedagogy.
- In the second round, the candidates must demonstrate their musical abilities. In Madrid, for example, they must sight-read a rhythm, sight-read with an instrument and compose a song and an easy arrangement for a given text.
- In the third round, the candidates must give an oral explanation on a musical theme –also selected at random from a syllabus– from a scientific as well as a teaching perspective.

Points proposed by each member –from 0 to 10– are averaged, but with a clause that forces internal negotiation: grades with a difference greater than three are cancelled. Merits for degrees and training, and for length of service in private schools or substitutions in public schools are added, according to a set of criteria, only to the applicants who pass the three rounds. The posts are filled according to the final scores, which are critical when there are more candidates who have passed than there are vacancies to be filled.

This brief description of the specific mechanism to acquire a position in the public school system warrants an early interpretation: in spite of the bureaucratic regulations prescribed by the Ministry of Education and the local administrations, it is the teachers themselves who decide who is qualified to teach general music. And it warrants a second interpretation: the examination boards’ members surely have in mind a particular profile for that decision, which is independent of university curricula. Teachers’ knowledge, as BRESLER (1994) suggests, is basically contextual, and includes not only the subject they teach but also a psychological understanding of students and a sociological understanding of school reality. If this knowledge lets them verify what competencies are needed to face teaching successfully, and at the same time they are

required to evaluate those competencies in the candidates, why not asking them about a profile in which their word is the last?

Although many studies are carried out through surveys, this tool runs the risk of limiting questions to what already is in the researcher's mind. To get also the *emic* themes –those proposed by the participants themselves– I try to sketch a first answer to the problem through a case study from the qualitative perspective propounded by STAKE (1995). Although the case is approached in an instrumental way –that is, to try to understand a broader issue– I do not attempt to generalize anything to the whole country –for example, through random sampling and statistical operations. On the contrary, I limit myself to looking for a deeper understanding in a concrete case: the latest competitive exams in Madrid.

The study was carried out –for accessibility reasons– in July, 2003, during the week when the third round took place. The members of the examination boards, whose ages were from 27 to 62 years old, were interested in collaborating in the research. Their experiences in teaching music ranged from 2 to 12 years, and some had been teaching even longer –up to 35 years– as classroom teachers. More than half of the teachers interviewed hold the “Primary Teacher with Specialisation in Music Education” degree, though the older and more experienced teachers only hold the “Primary Teacher” degree, as the former did not exist during their period of formal education. Three quarters had conservatory studies with intermediate level degrees –six years for wind instruments, eight for piano or strings– and all but three had had some performing experience in choirs or instrumental ensembles. During that week I did sixteen interviews, which I recorded and transcribed, with the exception of three who asked me to only take notes, submitting a copy to the interviewee for revision.

Emerging themes

Musical training

The first theme emerging from the interviews is the tension between teaching training and musical training. Asked about the necessary skills to be a good music teacher, half of the subjects began with musical abilities, and the other half with personal qualities related with an idealized vision of the “teacher image.” In principle, there is agreement on the fact that the required musical training is not that of an instrumental virtuoso, and that both aspects must maintain a proper balance:

“I think it must be a fifty per cent: to be a musician, but at the same time to be an educationalist”

However, the group of teachers with less musical training seemed positioned to place less importance on the musical aspects. Therefore, while the majority considered optimum an intermediate level conservatory degree and minimum a four-year elementary level degree, in this group even the necessity of the latter was rejected:

“...you don't need an elementary level degree, because you don't teach beyond sixteenth-notes.”

Three reasons underlie this lack of demand of music knowledge. The first is a different balance of teaching priorities:

“So, the first thing is to be a primary teacher. That is the first, with more or less aptitudes –that is according to each person. And afterwards, primary music teacher.”

The second, an undervaluation of the cognitive complexity of the musical abilities children develop:

“Then –after all– to teach playing the recorder, and to teach the notes and a little rhythm, you don’t need a lot.”

The third, the value of declarative knowledge above procedural knowledge (DOWLING, 1993), probably caused by a wrong distinction between concepts and skills in the official curriculum, and by the memorizing tradition in ear training teaching in conservatories:

“If you don’t know a lot and you are teaching triplets, and a child asks you if there are triplets of other notes... Of course, if you don’t know you can’t answer, but in this way you can tell him: ‘Yes, there are sixteenth-note triplets’.”

The majority group, however, agreed in the requirement of a broad musical training, because

“...you will not be able to transmit what you can’t handle yourself.”

In this training, mastery of an instrument is the first demand:

“He must be able to play an instrument, to perform with it, to live through music.”

This musical experience intuitively coincides with the *praxial* perspective propounded by ELLIOT (1994), and would include aspects typical of performing arts:

“...the instrument has given me a discipline and a way of watching the world perhaps different...”

Although there is no generalized agreement, musical abilities mentioned are:

- a good vocal technique;
- playing the recorder;
- playing a harmonic instrument, as well as a melodic one; and
- ear training.

An understanding of music structure, styles and history, and of music theory, is mentioned in reference to musical knowledge. Besides, a teacher advocates a broad musical culture:

“If you were a classroom teacher, were you to read only bank reports and children books? You should have a cultural ground to teach better.”

With reference to the needed knowledge to *teach* music, it is mentioned:

- methodologies –and among them, specially the Orff-Schulwerk;
- availability of methods to teaching music audition in the classroom;
- harmony, arranging; and
- information technology for music education.

Pedagogic training

Which are the necessary pedagogic skills to teach music? The interviewees mentioned some such as knowing how to motivate, or be able to improvise because

“...you need to adjust to what children demand at any moment...”

But more than pedagogic skills themselves, the stress is put on personal qualities like being active, creative or innovative. Those who give priority to pedagogic over musical training seem to have a certain difficulty in objectifying those skills:

“To me, the most important is that the person be ‘teacher’, whatever he teaches: English or Music...”

The idealization of the quality of “teacher”¹ is accompanied with its refusal to those who, despite holding that degree, are only interested in

“...their kids knowing all the scales and a series of concepts. But they are not ‘teachers’.”

However, there is no clear definition of what is “being teacher.” Emotional aspects are mentioned in the answers like “being in tune with children”, “enjoying what you do”, “let others experience what you feel” or “communicate tenderness,” but without specifying how they can be evaluated in a competitive exam:

“The other day, when I was examining, I said to myself: ‘This woman is teacher’. Because I saw that she was such a tender person, so nice to listen to, with a sensibility that you say ‘I don’t know, but I think she is teacher’. But in the end she didn’t pass.”

It is neither clear how this “teacher quality” is developed:

“I can’t tell you how you get it.”

On the contrary, there is a lack of confidence in getting it at university:

“Life teaches you to be ‘teacher’, not university.”

Training itineraries:

When they analyze their careers, more than half of the subjects are not satisfied with their studies:

¹ Here “teacher” corresponds to the Spanish word “maestro”, used only for primary teachers. A secondary teacher is called “profesor”.

“What you are taught at university isn’t very useful, either. I think you learn more with practise.”

What is the reason for this lack of confidence in training provided by the university and the conservatory among those who have studied in both? A coincidental point is the necessity of a music entrance exam for the “Teacher with Speciality in Music Education” degree:

“There is a mistake in the training of music teachers: you are allowed to get into a teachers’ college with no musical knowledge.”

It turns out that this necessity, discussed behind closed doors by university professors for more than a decade, is also shared by practitioners. How is it possible that an anomalous situation can be maintained in Spain for such a long period of time without negative evaluation by those interested in being paid attention to?

There was also a coincidence in considering teachers’ college studies insufficient –without conservatory studies– to pass a competitive exam:

“The music notions received in teachers’ colleges –which you see here in those who have not complemented their training– leave a lot to be desired.”

As for the candidates who have not studied in a conservatory:

“...those who only hold a teaching degree have little chance of passing. Whatever you want with respect to the themes, but you give them an instrument... and no. You tell them to write an arrangement... and no: they don’t have an overall view of music. They didn’t have enough time.”

Some see a contradiction in that:

“I think that what is taught in university is not coherent with what is demanded in the competitive examination.”

The dissatisfaction to a certain extent can be due to the complexity of being trained in two unrelated institutions. That is why they ask that universities

“...give an adequate training to become a music teacher, and that you need not to turn to private lessons and schools of music. Because that training is not given by universities.”

In the present situation, the duration of studies is considered insufficient:

“...university studies suffer from that. Bear in mind that it’s only three years: a degree in which general issues are taught. They are right, but you don’t go enough into detail.”

And this is justified:

“You don’t make a musician in three years. And if you don’t make a musician, you don’t make a music teacher.”

What is suggested by those who have been trained in the present situation of divorce between both institutions? On one hand, the degree extension in one or two years, to tackle more specifically musical subjects:

“It should be a bachelor of arts in which certain musical studies (...) be included.”

On the other, a curriculum change to reduce the number on non-musical subjects studied nowadays:

“A great reorganization, focusing the “Teacher with Speciality in Music Education” degree to music education.” ... “Well, it is true that sometimes you have to teach other subjects at school. But I don’t think that having studied Maths in a teachers’ college will help me teach that subject better.”

The proposal of subjects includes:

- dance, as a core subject for three years;
- harmony and arranging;
- keyboard harmony;
- complementary instruments;
- more ensemble practice; and
- ear training as an optional subject for students without conservatory studies.

Some seem to be also dissatisfied with the general pedagogic training received at college:

“Then –you know– we found out that we had no idea, no idea of how to plan. In my class nobody knew how to plan. You don’t really understand those concepts –curriculum, educational project, objectives which are very abstract– until you work:...”

The selection process

Although the questions asked to the interviewees did not include the competitive examinations themselves (because of the due discretion for taking part on examination boards) some spontaneous comments enlighten the issue we are dealing with. Particularly, the convenience of reversing the order of the rounds, starting with the practical examination:

“In a written test you select one hundred and something persons. In theory everybody can learn the syllabus if they spend enough time, but in that round you eliminate people that probably are great teachers, great educators. You are not giving them the opportunity to get to a second round—the practical examination—where they can show the music knowledge they have, nor to the third, where they can show if they know how to apply the syllabus in the classroom.”

The rounds order is actually crucial in the substitute teachers lists, made up of:

- those who have passed the selection but did not get the post—when there are not enough vacancies;
- those who have passed the first and the second rounds;
- those who have only passed the first round; and sometimes

- those who have not passed any.

Temporary hiring is done according to this order and the previous length of substitute service:

“Those who reach the second round get ahead of those who don’t. Many of these might have more music teaching competences, but because of not having passed a written test they will not have the possibility of demonstrating that they can accompany with an instrument, that they sing in tune, that they compose very well... which in the end is the basic. Actually, we are putting some people ahead of those who have more capacity, for merely having passed a test.”

An important part of the profile the examination boards seem to have in mind is implicit in the following suggestion:

“We should start with the practical round, because in the first is just a question of studying and knowing the themes. But I think that we eliminate a lot of worthy people.”

What does it mean to be “worthy”? Asked by the sense of the word, she explains:

“‘Worthy’ in the sense that they know music and that they could be good teachers.”

Conclusions and proposals

Not all the teachers interviewed can verbalize individually a complete music teacher profile that includes a clear series of skills and knowledge, musical as well as pedagogical. Nevertheless, the present competitive examination system seems to succeed in shaping it through the examination board internal debate: the profile investigated through these interviews might emerge, in practice, in the discussions held by the board members and in the marks they give to the candidates for their performance. As in other sectors –educational as well as business– it seems to be a tendency to reproduce one’s own profile: the higher the examiners’ musical level is, the higher the musical knowledge demand is, and vice versa. Even so, there is an agreement that an intermediate musical level is required, but in no case the teacher’s musical skills are mentioned as a requisite to be able to evaluate the development of the students’ musical skills. A balance between musical and pedagogical training also seems to be achieved, according to the double training the majority of the examiners have received, but the complaint against the rounds order suggests that in the end, musical skill is preferred to theoretical knowledge. The interviewees were dissatisfied with that “divorce” training itinerary –conservatories and colleges of Education– and suggest changes which include a higher proportion of specifically musical subjects in the career “Teacher with Speciality in Music Education,” a music entrance exam and its extension towards a Bachelors degree and graduate studies.

Three proposals, as a sort of invitation to readers, complete this case study limited to the Madrid region. The first is the extension to the whole country of this design, to clarify if the conclusions are similar or if there are distinguished features in other Spanish regions. The second could include other research designs to obtain more statistical representation, based on the *emic* themes which arise in the present study. The third, a comparative study of the music teacher training, profile and selection processes in Spain and in other countries.

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