

## **The Academic-Support Group: Peer-Mentoring Experiences of Early-Career Music Teacher Educators**

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### **Abstract**

*The transition from doctoral student to higher education faculty member provides a unique set of challenges. Individuals attempt to balance research, service, and teaching requirements while also experiencing changes in their personal lives, such as geographical relocation. Peer-mentoring of early-career faculty may be used to support this challenging period and support the longevity of those who follow this career path. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the peer-mentoring experience of a group of early-career elementary general music teacher educators. Research questions were: (1) How did participants describe the experience of peer-mentoring? (2) How did participation impact participants personally, and; (3) How did participation impact participants professionally? We present our findings in four themes related to “finding our place” within our peer-mentoring group and the larger scope of higher education to share our experiences and encourage peer mentoring among early-career music teacher educators.*

**Keywords:** early-career faculty, mentoring, elementary general music teacher educator, peer-mentoring

Researchers have documented the challenging transition from doctoral student to a faculty member in the various fields (Dinkelman et al., 2006; Murray & Male, 2005), including music education (Kuebel et al., 2018; Martin, 2016). Common difficulties have included frequently changing pedagogical needs, negotiating professional workload expectations, managing criticism, enduring isolation, and navigating the high-stakes job market. In addition, transitioning from doctoral student to faculty member may also include a shift within or away from their support system, consequently intensifying existing difficulties.

Researchers have frequently explored mentorship for preservice and early-career inservice teachers (e.g., Conway et al., 2002; Conway, 2003; Conway et al., 2010; Krueger, 1999; Shieh & Conway, 2005). A growing number of researchers have investigated music teacher educator mentoring. Several authors have investigated how mentoring eased the transition into higher education and supported early-career faculty (Draves & Koops, 2011; Pellegrino et al., 2014). Other researchers have examined the mentoring relationships between faculty members and doctoral students (Bond & Koops, 2014; Kuebel et al., 2018). Faculty-student mentoring relationships tended to prioritize research activity (Manathunga & Goozée, 2007) and were generally perceived as positive (Baker et al., 2013).

Although professor-student mentoring can be meaningful, peer-mentoring may provide an opportunity to cultivate more equitable relationships less dependent upon proximity to collaborative research projects and institutional hierarchies. Draves and Koops (2011) examined their longitudinal peer-mentoring relationship from doctoral studies through the first several years as higher education faculty. Several benefits of their peer-mentoring relationship included research and teaching support and improving mentoring skills with graduate students. They also

discussed the importance of work-life balance as they sought to achieve this for themselves and encourage it among their peers.

A music education peer-mentoring group has recently reported their specific experiences in two studies (Pellegrino, Kastner, et al., 2018; Pellegrino et al., 2014). As they (Pellegrino et al., 2014) examined the progress of becoming music teacher educators, three themes emerged: (a) self-doubt and fear of failure as researchers; (b) struggle to establish balance; and (c) the group as a safe place. A follow-up study examined the long-term effects of their peer-mentoring group and their experiences as collaborative researchers (Pellegrino, Kastner, et al., 2018). Again, they concluded with themes that aligned similarly to the original study.

Limited literature exists regarding elementary general music mentoring. In one study, elementary general music educators reported that peer mentoring “remedied isolation, supported teacher learning, and provided an environment for non-threatening analysis of personal, situated views of the participants’ music teaching” (Stanley, 2012, p. 53). Reese (2015) described preservice and experienced music teachers’ experiences with virtual mentoring in an elementary general music course. The benefits included learning via dialogic inquiry and expanded perspectives on teaching. A subsequent study (Reese, 2016) examined experienced music teachers’ perceptions of their experiences as virtual mentors in a general music methods course. The participants also described the benefits resulting from these mentorships. However, these elementary general music mentoring studies involved experienced teachers serving as mentors to inexperienced preservice teachers and not peer mentorship. Therefore, a need remains to examine peer-mentoring benefits among elementary general music teacher educators in higher education.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the peer-mentoring experience of a group of early-career elementary general music teacher educators. Research questions for the study were threefold: (1) How did participants describe the experience of peer-mentoring? (2) How did participation impact participants personally, and; (3) How did participation impact participants professionally?

### **Method**

According to Moustakas (1994), the goal of phenomenological research “is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and can provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). van Manen (1990) wrote, “phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of the meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9). Phenomenological research emphasizes a phenomenon and explores the phenomenon among a group of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Therefore, the researcher-participants chose a phenomenological approach to describe personal experiences with the phenomenon of participating in a peer-mentoring group for early-career elementary general music teacher educators.

### **Description of the Academic-Support Group**

We formed the Academic-Support Group at the Mountain Lake Colloquium for General Music teachers in May 2017. Before the conference, Marie’s (pseudonym) graduate school mentor had suggested that Marie develop a peer-mentoring group as a support network for their first semester in higher education. At Mountain Lake, Marie approached individuals they had met previously in other professional settings and individuals to whom their doctoral mentor had introduced them to share the idea of creating such a system. Marie followed up with interested potential members after the conference via email and social media to organize meetings and establish a process for the group. Unfortunately, some invited members were unable to continue

for various reasons. We describe the four permanent members of the group below. The members discussed a name for the group and agreed upon “Academic-Support Group.”

### **Participants**

Academic-support group members and study participants included Marie, Julia, Jennifer, and Taylor (pseudonyms). Marie was in their first semester in a tenure-track position at a medium-sized teaching university at the start of the data collection period. Julia was a second-year visiting assistant professor and Coordinator of Music Education at medium-sized liberal art teaching university with a small music education program. Jennifer was a second-year assistant professor at a large Research 1 university with a small music education program. Taylor was in their final year of doctoral work at a large Research 1 university. All participants lived in different states.

Three academic-support group members, Marie, Julia, and Jennifer, chose to research the experience of participating in a peer-mentoring group. Taylor decided to remain in the academic-support group and act as a participant in the study but not to take on the role of researcher due to other work obligations. Initially, there was some conflict as discussions of research specifics encroached on regular meeting time. To separate the research component from the actual academic-support group meetings, the three researcher-participants began to meet separately to discuss the research process. When describing the “participants” of the research, the researchers are referencing the four participants in the study: Marie, Julia, Jennifer, and Taylor.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Researchers completed data collection during the 2017-2018 academic year. The data sources for the study included: group conference calls, Slack messaging platform communications, participant journals, a shared accountability check-in document, and final

reflections. Group video conference calls took place via Google Hangouts once per week for one hour from September through May, with pauses over Thanksgiving and Winter breaks. While study participants mainly joined the calls from their offices, they also engaged from their homes, cars before or after student observations, or coffee shops between off-campus meetings. We recorded and transcribed all calls.

The group used email, texts, and Slack to communicate updates and logistics. We used these tools in between meetings as well as surrounding meeting times as needed. In addition, we downloaded and analyzed messages with all other data.

Each participant created a private journal to document their reflections throughout the data collection period. Participants used these journals to debrief from the weekly calls and share topic ideas for future calls. Participants also journaled about connections made between events taking place between calls and group discussions.

The “accountability check-in” referred to a specific Google spreadsheet shared in the Team Google Drive. Before each call, participants would record their weekly goals in research, teaching, service, learning, and personal activities. During the calls, participants would share goals and discuss any questions, concerns, or support needed. Throughout the week, participants would return to the document to mark the completed items or modify their goals as needed.

At the end of the data collection period, each participant completed a guided reflection which included questions developed by the lead researcher. Responses included descriptions, benefits, and challenges regarding their experience in the group.

We considered all data sources in the analysis, including the transcriptions of the weekly calls and the written communication from Slack, journals, reflections, and accountability check-in. The three researcher-participants analyzed all data following methods outlined by Moustakas

(1994). First, the researchers read all data and determined significant statements (Creswell, 2013) through the process of horizontalization. Next, each researcher coded the data from a shared code list and re-coded some sections of one another's work to confirm coding consistency. We discussed concerns, modifications, and disagreements through research notes and during research meetings. Then, the researchers developed meaning by organizing the codes into themes.

We established trustworthiness using triangulation and reflexivity (Creswell, 2013). The researchers implemented triangulation of data using the sources previously described to determine which themes emerged in multiple forms of data. We implemented reflexivity through the data collection and analysis process by reflecting on our group experiences and other mentoring relationships. We discussed our thoughts in research meetings to provide an unbiased presentation of the data.

### **Findings**

The following section presents findings as four themes related to the idea of “finding our place” as we navigated our new roles as peer mentors and higher education faculty members. The participants (“we” for the duration of the findings) frequently addressed concerns and questions related to our membership in the academic-support group, as well as navigating a profession that was new to us, with all the accompanying logistics and expectations associated with our roles in academia. Since we were all early-career academics, we often had similar concerns, including reappointment, tenure and promotion, scholarly productivity, and balancing personal and professional lives. The academic-support group provided a safe forum for posing our teaching questions and sharing our collective resources. Within the broad category of “finding our place,” we discussed our search for our place within the academic-support group, in

professional communities, with personal and professional balance, as researchers, and as music teacher educators.

### **Finding Our Place in the Academic-Support Group**

Within the academic-support group itself, a common topic in our discussions focused on navigating our roles and finding our place as group members. Since we were at similar places in our careers, there was a natural intersection between finding our place professionally and finding our place within the academic-support group. However, differences emerged as we shared more about our unique experiences.

Members had different motivations for participating in peer mentoring, and some navigation of roles and clarification of the purposes of the group occurred during the initial meetings. Participants' motivations may have been influenced by their career, impacting how they situated themselves in the academic-support group. For example, there were many celebrations over the various steps of Taylor's dissertation, which the other three members supported as they had each completed that process previously; however, we each had different timelines and requirements for tenure that impacted feelings of urgency towards research. Julia reflected that they were initially interested in having a forum to collaborate on future research projects and a safe space to speak freely about the challenges and positive aspects of being an early-career faculty member. Jennifer wanted a safe space to hold them accountable for research productivity while managing the isolation they felt within their local community.

Group members also brought different relationship dynamics to the group, as some group members had existing relationships before joining the academic-support group and others had never met each other: Marie had met Taylor and Jennifer once each and had not met Julia; Jennifer and Julia were acquaintances through a professional organization; Taylor was only



familiar with Marie. Members described navigating intersecting and overlapping relationships, both personal and professional. Marie briefly described the emerging relationships in their journal, “Good call with Jennifer yesterday... Still finding our groove since we don’t know each other well yet.” Taylor journaled:

There are pros to having been close with some members of this group before we began. I felt more comfortable with them immediately. However, it can also be tricky to navigate as our previously established sphere and this new sphere overlap but are also separate. It will be interesting to see how this sometimes tension unfolds. (Taylor, personal journal, October 11, 2017)

The members worked on developing relationships by purposefully including personal and professional topics in each call.

Establishing the flow of the calls was also something that developed over time. Their role as the “founder” of the academic-support group challenged Marie. Although they were motivated to establish the group, they also wanted to be supported by the group. So they wrote in a journal entry:

While I am the lead researcher, I do not always want to lead every call - I want to be a participant. Thinking about how [my mentor] could get me ... to step up for more leadership, but it is different in a peer situation when there is no teacher/student dynamic. (Marie, personal journal, October 3, 2017)

Other members felt this desire to be part of the support system and feel supported by the system, which seemed possible within the peer-mentoring model.

Another aspect of finding our place within the academic-support group is our shared expertise as general music specialists. Since the participants had similar interest areas, competing

for the same professional opportunities was present. Early on, the group discussed the possibility that we might be applying for similar jobs or professional service positions and experiencing varying levels of research success, which would potentially bring up complicated feelings.

We navigated this potential tension by addressing this area of concern directly. For example, Marie described this in their journal:

We will possibly go up for similar jobs if/when they open, which brings up some enjoyable feelings. ... I had even suggested that we didn't talk about the job search - I was surprised I was the only one who felt that way. ... I realized that the open conversations helped me see how much outside our control in job searches. (Marie, personal journal, October 25, 2017)

We also continued to work on establishing a personal rapport and creating a "safe space to speak freely without fear of judgment or any sort of professional repercussions" (Julia, final reflection, May 12, 2018). Participants were encouraged to share only as much information as they were comfortable sharing. They were able to discuss specific professional activities in which they experienced varying levels of success while still maintaining a solid social rapport.

By the end of the academic year, we reflected on the connections we had built. Julia wrote, "The persons in the group are accepting, welcoming, and very supportive, and I was interested in interacting with them professionally as well as socially" (Julia, final reflection, May 12, 2018). Jennifer also highlighted the importance of social interactions with other group members:

Another critical component included the friendships I have cultivated. I began to look forward to these conversations with others, and I started appreciating and admiring [the members]. They felt the pressure of the job and lifestyle similarly, but they each

approached it differently in some ways and the same in other ways. They are all brilliant, and I felt humbled to get to spend time with them every week. (Jennifer, final reflection, May 15, 2018)

To further support the relationships developed through the academic-support group, members also made intentional connections during any conferences during the year of data collection.

Marie reflected on the connections that were established within the group: “It was a great call that was able to happen because we had built connections throughout the semester. [It] ended with everyone saying, ‘I needed this today’--exactly what I was hoping for with this group” (Marie, personal journal, December 7, 2017). Participants conveyed a strong sense of the benefits they received by finding their place with the academic-support group, including the social interactions that resulted from participation. All perceived that peer mentoring within the group was beneficial both in terms of giving and receiving support.

### **Finding Our Place in Professional Communities**

Participants often lacked colleagues at their institutions with similar scholarly interests and expertise; the academic-support group helped alleviate a sense of isolation. For example, Jennifer wrote, “My advisor told me that being a researcher would be isolating, and they were correct” (Jennifer, final reflection, May 15, 2018). Marie echoed these same sentiments regarding a sense of isolation:

Every Google Hangout starts with my camera and the words ‘you are the only one here at the top of the screen. This is kind of what academia feels like so far if I let it. I am the only one in my office. The only one is writing this paper, the only one at the front of the classroom, the only one entering the grades. ‘Invite people’ the prompt encourages. I

have. I have invited people, but I also have to be okay being the only one here. (Marie, personal journal, October 3, 2017)

The goal of the academic-support group and the weekly calls were to create intentional opportunities for connection in a career that we knew would be isolating. In addition, the network was designed to support each member during the times of independent work that exist in academia.

In addition to alleviating a sense of isolation, participants also reflected on the opportunities to expand professional connections and share resources that the academic-support group presented. Marie shared, “It is nice to know that my network of mentors is growing beyond faculty to peers and by extension their resources as well” (Marie, final reflection, May 8, 2018). Julia wrote, “Being able to ask the other group members for resources related to the courses we are teaching has been incredibly useful” (Julia, final reflection, May 1, 2018). The connections of each member allowed our professional networks to develop much more quickly as we shared professional contacts and tools.

Another way we expanded professional connections was through the awareness of opportunities and recommendations different members brought to the group members. For example, one member joined an early childhood music organization and discussed this during several meetings. This sparked interest among other members who later applied and were appointed board positions. Similarly, members shared contact information for professional gigs, such as facilitating online courses and conducting children’s choir festivals. These connections were incredibly impactful as we worked in the same specialization and were more easily able to connect one another with relevant opportunities.

### **Finding Our Place in Personal and Professional Balance**

Challenges in balancing personal and professional life featured prominently in the group's written reflections, accountability check-ins, and weekly conversations. Marie stated:

I'm trying not to spend all weekend working like I don't want to get into that habit, even though I could. So I'm trying to limit that and take a break, and it leads to some anxiety on Mondays because I'm like, 'I should've tried to get all this done on Sunday so I can start new and feel ready to go.' (Marie, group meeting, September 28, 2017)

Taylor continued the discussion:

I want to support you in taking time off weekends. So, two weekends ago I did ... I took maybe half a day off, and then by Thursday that wall just hits, and so, last weekend I did take the weekend off, and it reminded me, 'Oh yeah, I should be doing this.' (Taylor, group meeting, September 28, 2017)

As early-career academics, we were all learning how to balance our new professional expectations as we settled into our new roles. Geographic relocation also compounded this issue. All participants had moved to different states, away from friends and family, for their jobs. While each participant had differing living situations in terms of family and partners, they were also navigating the dynamics of new career experiences and how to balance this with their personal lives.

The academic-support group members included weekly personal goals in the accountability check-in and weekly class to encourage the balance between personal and professional lives. Personal goals included time at the gym, reading for pleasure, disconnecting from devices and social media, rest or sleep, mindfulness, positive self-talk, and making time for personal connections with friends and family. Taylor reflected:

It was beneficial to use the accountability spreadsheet to write out my goals for the week—especially since we included personal goals. This helped me sometimes manage to balance what was necessary with what felt urgent but was less critical. I also think practicing this as a doc student helped my transition into full-time faculty. The first semester will be tough no matter what, and I could not keep up with weekly goals, but I think this practice and seeing my peers do this as assistant professors helped me be more thoughtful as I formulated to-do lists. It was also helpful as a doc student to see what types of things assistant professors put on their lists. (Taylor, final reflection, May 3, 2018)

Sharing these experiences provided a vital reality check that the goal is longevity, and breaks are vital when working in academia.

While we yearned for more balance in our personal lives and time away from work tasks, we also found ourselves seeking additional work opportunities. We discussed these with the group. Several members of the academic-support group accepted teaching and presenting responsibilities outside of their university work to promote themselves professionally and make additional income. Jennifer stated, “So if I could afford not to do it, I wouldn’t do it” (Jennifer, group meeting, April 11, 2018), briefly summarizing the conflict of not wanting to accept additional work coupled with the need to do so for financial reasons.

The peer-mentoring space provided the members with consistent reminders that taking time was essential. Having recently finished our graduate work, or in Taylor’s case still being in graduate school, we seemed to strive to maintain the pace of those busy years, compounded by the new ticking of the tenure clock. We discussed personal events unrelated to work throughout the calls and celebrated when we engaged in new hobbies or took time for ourselves.

## **Finding Our Place as Researchers**

As a group of elementary general specialists, we were able to support one another uniquely as researchers. We were able to share relevant resources, act as readers with a deeper understanding of the specific content, and discuss similar challenges related to our content area. In addition, members collaborated on several projects and learned from each other's unique research interests and academic research upbringing.

A critical component of the academic-support group included describing our scholarly activity through written and verbal descriptions. During our meetings, we discussed our progress and goals regarding specific projects. Going through our research, "laundry lists" seemed to provide opportunities for self-and peer accountability.

Listing our numerous projects illuminated both the negative and positive feelings that might accompany the reality of research activity; time limitations and stress seemed to emerge as common threads. For example, Marie described a particularly stressful week, "I'm doing okay. This week has been exceptionally busy, so that's been challenging, as my personal goal for the week was not to panic" (Marie, group meeting, September 28, 2017). Other participants often echoed these sentiments.

Jennifer more specifically addressed the cycling of scholarly work at various stages, in line with the common theme of finding time to produce:

Our jobs are so fluid there it's constant research in and research out. But I have a big bubble with the research, proposals, proposals, proposals due, and I'm not finishing the studies or writing up the studies and publishing them. I haven't gotten enough publications because the data are just sitting there. (Jennifer, group meeting, November 29, 2017)

We had all learned different approaches to the “publishing pipeline,” which we could share, providing new ideas to the members.

Listing activities was challenging, sometimes stressful, and highlighted concerns regarding limited time. Still, members found value in sharing their projects and “to-do” lists with the group. Julia reflected: “Discussing and sharing our progress on our research has helped to hold me accountable regarding my personal goals” (Julia, final reflection, May 12, 2018).

Jennifer agreed that they benefited from sharing their goals with the group:

One tremendous benefit was tracking weekly goals and lists of productivity. I had previously thought that I was someone who enjoyed having numerous plates spinning. In listing my projects weekly, I noticed that the quantity held me back from being more productive. Listing them all was essential and, honestly, embarrassing. While I still have too many plates spinning, I’m more aware of the problems of always working toward finishing projects more quickly. The awareness was most important. Another benefit of tracking weekly goals and lists was the personal motivation to see what others were researching—seeing them progress energized my progression. Hearing their excitement about research excited me. (Jennifer, final reflection, May 15, 2018)

Marie also reflected on how the group acted as an “accountability partner” without adding additional pressure:

I liked discussing my goals for each week and seeing what others added some extra motivation. I don’t think we ever made one another feel ‘bad’ if we didn’t achieve our goals for the week or were going through difficult times. I liked hearing the perspectives of other people who understand my work but have different experiences. (Marie, final reflection, May 8, 2018)



The value of this exercise outweighed any negative feelings that might have accompanied it for members of the group.

For some of us, our goals connected to how we felt about ourselves as researchers, our researcher identity, and how our researcher identity overlapped with relationships. Jennifer addressed these intersecting identities:

I don't know what my goals are. Since Christmas, I've kind of been going through this identity thing with, 'am I happy being this researcher?' Like, does this make me happy? But it *does* make me happy. I think the problem is that it's so tied to my last relationship because he was such an essential part of me finishing my dissertation. That relationship ended up being a lot more tied to my identity as a researcher than I ever anticipated.

(Jennifer, group meeting, March 28, 2018)

The space of the academic-support group allowed Jennifer and the other members to explore these vulnerable ideas.

The concept of imposter syndrome, or one's doubt in their accomplishments and abilities, also emerged in some conversations related to research and identity. For Jennifer, having others share openly about the feelings associated with imposter syndrome was helpful. Julia found that being able to be supported and support others eased the tension of imposter syndrome: "I don't think this group would have worked for me if I were only receiving support and help. It was in giving it too that I found satisfaction and a quieting of imposter syndrome" (Julia, final reflection, May 12, 2018). Each member was relieved to be able to discuss these feelings openly.

### **Finding our Place as Music Teacher Educators**

The academic-support group also contributed to participants' sense of having found their place as new music teacher educators. They reflected that we often shared similar concerns since

we were all in similar places in our careers. Being able to ask other group members for resources related to the courses we were teaching was useful. As would be expected, since the academic-support group members were all general music specialists, there was overlap in their teaching experiences. We discussed assignments and course outlines for similar classes throughout the year, creative projects we were trying with our students, and how to address challenging aspects of our teaching loads.

Specifically related to one ordinary course, elementary music methods, the participants frequently discussed the challenge of condensing valuable content into one semester. For example, Marie described this challenge during a meeting:

There's just no, no way I can cover everything that needs to be covered. And ... I'm okay saying that to them. ... today I said, 'there's no way I can cover all this, but I'm giving you all the resources, you know, or a lot more resources. (Marie, group meeting, November 1, 2017)

Jennifer shared similar concerns. "Elementary music methods are hard. Nobody tells you. It's hard to be responsible for everything they need to know, which you can't possibly give to them." (Jennifer, group meeting, November 1, 2017) We attempted to soothe this conflict by sharing curriculum ideas and appreciated commiserating on this point.

As elementary general specialists, we needed to effectively maintain our learning and teaching to teach elementary general music methods. We discussed continuing our education by completing levels of certification in various teaching approaches, such as Kodály, Orff, and Gordon. Another aspect of our role as music teacher educators was ensuring that we maintained opportunities to teach children. All academic-support groups still taught early childhood music classes, children's choirs, or elementary music classes. These teaching experiences allowed us to

maintain our relevant teaching experiences while also inviting our undergraduate and graduate students to participate and strengthen their development. We often discussed these learning and teaching experiences to share our professional growth and offer suggestions to those interested in pursuing similar opportunities.

Reflecting on the experience as a whole, participants conveyed a strong positive sense of ways the academic-support group helped them “find their place” professionally and personally. As Julia shared in their final reflection, the “academic-support-group has been valuable in mitigating some of my job-related stress, and has been a safe place to vent frustration as well as share the positive aspects of our professional and personal lives.” (Julia, final reflection, May 12, 2018).

### **Discussion**

The small sample size limited the generalizability of this study; participants’ experiences may be beneficial to future generations of music education faculty. We outlined the connections between our study and those of other researchers that may also suggest implications for the field. We also provided suggestions for future research.

The first step within our peer-mentoring community was to establish relationships with one another. While Draves and Koops (2011) met during their graduate program, the members of the academic-support group came together from various places geographically and in their careers. Our unique, common thread was that we were currently striving to be early-career elementary general music faculty. Thus, with varying degrees of familiarity with one another, we consciously established personal connections while sharing potentially vulnerable aspects of our work. This was similar to the community described by Pellegrino et al. (2014), “... we found that our community did not begin instantaneously, but was negotiated and developed over time” (p.

472). However, the geographical diversity of our group enabled us to make professional and personal connections that expanded our networks and allowed us to share unique experiences, benefitting members in various ways.

Regarding peer-mentoring groups, we recommend that members take time to develop personal connections within professional relationships. This may allow for deeper connections and more significant benefits within this type of community. Including weekly check-ins on personal goals may be an approach to developing these relationships. Our peer mentoring group was unique in that we were all specialists in the same content area, elementary general music. This provided us with opportunities to support one through more profound levels of pedagogical understanding and created some tension due to the similarities in work. Future research may explore peer-mentoring relationships within other unique music education specializations.

Our peer-mentoring group also provided us with social stability as we relocated away from friends and family for our higher education careers. Tabachnick's (1992) assessment of moving for a job at a university suggested, "I now agree with the psychologists who consider the strain of relocating nearly as severe as that of losing a close relative, getting divorced, or failing to receive tenure" (p. 24). Therefore, while experiences may vary, we encourage higher education faculty to suggest that their doctoral students create widespread peer-mentoring relationships before graduation. In addition to providing stable relationships detached from physical proximity, doing so may expand their professional network to include individuals who might reside closer to their future jobs.

Institutional support, including formal mentoring, informal mentoring, and other professional development opportunities, seemed to be lacking across the participants. We assigned a formal institutional mentor to one of the three participants working at institutions

during data collection. At the same time, the other two received informal mentoring from a colleague in their department. All participants worked within smaller music education divisions where one of us was the only music education professor, and two others were half of the division within a music department. Additional research seems warranted regarding who receives institutional mentorship and if that, along with effectiveness, tends to vary based on the size of the institution or music education program.

Additionally, institutional mentoring did not seem to be a meaningful topic across participants in the current study. As participants, we seemed to favor the experiences and mentorship and our graduate mentors throughout our early careers, consistent with the relationship developed by Draves and Koops (2011). Sims (2016) also noted the tremendous importance of these graduate-level mentorships and their potential long-term effects of generating active, excited researchers.

The concept of balancing personal and professional lives was a common topic for the participants and is highlighted in other studies on peer-mentoring communities (Pellegrino, Conway, et al., 2018; Pellegrino et al., 2014). When examining the experiences of music education faculty, Pellegrino, Conway et al. (2018) found that males seemed more satisfied with the balance of teaching, research, and service than female participants and the balance between their personal and professional lives. The female and female-presenting participants in the current study expressed guilt over taking time for a personal life in that doing so would result in less work productivity.

The continuous need to differentiate personal time from research, teaching, and lesson planning time may have extended from the competitive and busy nature of the graduate school, with the additional factor of facing the tenure clock. The study in Pellegrino, Conway, et al.,

(2018) noted that 70% of music teacher educator participants reported feeling stress regarding the tenure process, consistent across participants from the current study. In examining how tenure-track faculty spent their work time, Hewitt and Thompson (2006) found that teaching and lesson planning tended to dominate professional time. Brewer and Rickels (2012) reported that only 10% of their respondents' workload was spent on research. Contrarily, participants within the current study spent the majority of peer-mentor and reflection time discussing or writing about research and research tasks. They seemed to have perceived that a majority of their professional time was devoted to research, although tracking minutes was not the intention of the original study. It may be of value to replicate Hewitt and Thompson (2006) and Brewer and Rickels (2012) to investigate the perception and potential reality of increased research time across early-career faculty. Participants' positive, although sometimes strained, feelings toward becoming active researchers in the field may have also been encouraged by their strong mentor/mentee relationships with active researchers during their doctoral studies (Sims, 2016).

The feelings of imposter syndrome were found among the participants and higher education faculty. Sims and Cassidy (2019) examined early career, university-level music educators. They found that participants reported moderate or high levels of imposter syndrome, with the area of research producing the most substantial feelings of frequency or intensity. Academic-support group participants seemed to find that their participation in a peer-mentoring group and directly discussing imposter syndrome feelings helped reduce this concern.

Regarding identity, the academic-support group participants discussed finding our place as music teacher educators. Pellegrino, Conway, et al., (2018) examined music education faculty members and found that they valued "three aspects of their professional identity: teacher educator, researcher, and musician" (p. 82). Contrary to our study, the academic-support group

did not commonly discuss selves as musicians; teacher educator and role as research were more frequent topics of conversation.

Meyers (2017) described successful socialization as “a dialectical process through which newcomers construct their particular roles as they interact and engage with others” (Austin, 2002, p. 97). Perhaps socialization limitations have contributed to doctoral student retention and persistence to degree completion, given that concerns researchers expressed regarding a potential decline of new music teacher educator faculty (Asmus, 2001; Brewer & Rickels, 2012). Social networks, including peer-mentoring groups, could support emerging music teacher educators in achieving successful socialization into the field. In addition, the support of successful peer-mentoring models might soothe explore one’s role as one enters higher education.

### **Conclusion**

What becomes evident from this research, and similar research on the topic, is the value of peer-mentoring. While mentoring relationships with experienced faculty are invaluable and necessary, the lack of power balance and friendship between individuals in the same place of their careers may provide helpful insight both professionally and personally. Therefore, we encourage mentors and mid-to-late-career faculty to encourage peer-mentoring for early-career faculty and doctoral students. The experience of participating in a peer-mentoring group allowed academic-support group participants to examine their experiences in higher education and as music teacher educators. Doing so developed an understanding of their place within these systems. By exploring and sharing our individual experiences, we hope to support all future music teacher educators and strengthen the understanding and importance of mentoring relationships.

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