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Do You Have the Personality for Teaching Music?

By Dr. David Snyder

It is not uncommon to hear experienced directors talk about other music teachers or student teachers and say things like, “she’s a natural” or “he has a wonderful teacher personality.” These statements, and others like them, usually refer to particular personality characteristics that some people possess in regard to how they work with young people, their ability to be in front of others, or how well they can get others (particularly children) to follow them. But what underlying personality traits draw music students to become music teachers? Is there a way to define and identify these personality traits so we can encourage more students with these traits to join the profession? Are there other personality types that avoid the music education field or tend to drop out of music education programs?

These are some of the questions that guided a recent study involving future music teachers. Six different classes of music education majors enrolled in a large Midwestern university were asked to take an online personality survey and then were tracked through graduation. Personality types, as determined by the Myers-Briggs Personality Type test, were then examined for how they related to choice of major and attrition within the music education degree program. The hope was to combine these findings with other research done on personality and get a snap shot of what personality types are drawn to teaching choir and further what types persist through graduation.

What is the Myers-Briggs Test?

Before sharing the results, it may be helpful to understand a little about the test used to determine personality type in this and other studies. The Myers-Briggs Personality Type test, based on psychologist Carl Jung’s theory of psychological types, is a common tool used to determine personality type. Subjects completing this test are assigned a four-letter descriptor representing four different dichotomies: Introversion/Extroversion, Sensing/Intuition, Thinking/Feeling and Judging/Perceiving. The resulting four-letter descriptor (16 different combinations are possible) describes the subject’s preferred mode of operation when interacting with other people. For example, with E types (for extroverted) the energy flow is outward, and the preferred focus is on other people and things, whereas with I types (for introverted) the energy flow is inward, and the preferred focus is on one’s own thoughts and ideas.

Here are four questions taken from the Myers-Briggs Foundation website that you can ask yourself to help determine which of the descriptors within the four distinctive dichotomies used in the Myers-Briggs Type test apply to you.

- Do you prefer to focus on the outer world (Extroversion) or on your own inner world (Introversion)?
- Do you prefer to focus on the basic information you take in (Sensing) or do you prefer to interpret and add meaning (iNtuition)?
- When making decisions, do you prefer to first look at logic and consistency (Thinking) or first look at the people and special circumstances (Feeling)?
- In dealing with the outside world, do you prefer to get things decided (Judging) or do you prefer to stay open to new information and options (Perceiving)?

It is important to note here that the judging type has nothing to do with being “judgmental” nor does the perceiving type refer to being “perceptive” as most understand it. They are simply personality descriptors relating to preferences on how decisions are to be made. If you are wondering where you fall within the 16 types presented in the Myers-Briggs matrix, there is a free on-line survey available that can help identify your personality type preferences at: www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/jtypes2.asp. The survey takes about 20 minutes to complete. After completing the survey, you can click on a detailed description of your four-letter type and also see career preferences for your type.

Which personality types are most common?

Table 1 is a summary of all the personality types and their frequency identified during this six-year longitudinal study. The table also contains the percentage that each type represented in the sample and the percentage that dropped from the music education program.

Personality type	Total enrolled	Percent of total	Total that dropped	Percent of those who dropped by type
ENFJ	87	31	20	23
ESFJ	46	16	12	26
INFJ	42	15	13	31
ENTJ	25	9	8	32
INTJ	14	5	5	36
ISFJ	14	5	4	29
ISTJ	13	4.5	3	23
INFP	8	3	6	75
ESFP	8	3	3	38
ENFP	8	3	3	38
ESTJ	6	2	2	33
ISFP	4	1	1	25
ENTP	2	.5	0	0
ESTP	1	.3	0	0
ISTP	1	.3	0	0
INTP	1	.3	0	0
Unkown	5	1	5	100
Total	285	100	85	29.5

The most common personality type identified in this sample of music education majors was ENFJ (Extravert-iNtuitive-Feeling-Judging) at just over 30 percent. This percentage was also consistent from year to year. What is interesting about this 30 percent figure is that only between two and four percent of the U.S. population on the whole is made up of ENFJs. Conversely, the ISFJ (Introvert-Sensing-Feeling-Judging) and ISTJ (Introvert-Sensing-Thinking-Judging) type, which are the two most common types within the U.S. population (comprising roughly 14 percent and 12 percent respectively), are hardly present in this sample of music education students.

Why then this extraordinarily high concentration of ENFJs in the music education program? According to the Myers-Briggs' Foundation website, an ENFJ is a natural born leader who is very in-tune to the needs of others. They are warm, empathetic, responsive, and responsible. They are able to take decisive action when necessary but are highly attuned to the emotions, needs, and motivations of others. They want to help others fulfill their potential. It

is easy to see how these traits would match well with someone intending to direct school-aged students in band or orchestra. Based on the above description, one might also expect research to identify a preference for the teaching profession by ENFJs and this study and several others certainly do. Teaching is consistently listed as an optimal career choice for ENFJs.

There are several other studies that, in addition to ENFJ, found ENFP (Extravert-iNtuitive-Feeling-Perceiving) types to be very common in music education populations and in public school performing ensembles. According to the Myers-Briggs foundation, ENFPs are warmly enthusiastic and imaginative and see life as full of possibilities; they are also spontaneous and flexible, often relying on their ability to improvise and their verbal fluency. Consequently, they do not like performing routine tasks or being under the control of other people. The perceiving personality type also prefers to keep all possibilities open when coming to a decision, sometimes waiting until the last possible minute to decide.

The Perceiving type in general likes to understand and adapt to the world rather than organize it. The Judging type, on the other hand, prefers a planned or orderly way of life, and likes to have things settled and organized. Both a “J” and a “P” can be organized, but “J”’s more often demonstrate this trait outwardly. This factor alone might lead a “J” type to choose a career in the classroom where structure and organization are essential for success. And in fact, of the 285 music education majors in this study, an overwhelming majority (87 percent) was classified as Js.

When looking at the Introversion (I)/Extroversion (E) dichotomy, a similar disparity in enrollment rates is revealed. The longitudinal study done for this article found almost twice as many “E”’s enrolled as “I”’s (183 to 97). The reader may again find this fact rather predictable. Most experienced educators and even the casual observer would tend to describe most teachers of school-aged children as “outgoing,” but let us revisit the definition of “extrovert” and “introvert” as given by the Myers-Briggs Foundation:

“Extraversion and Introversion as terms used by C. G. Jung explain different attitudes people use to direct their energy. These words have a meaning in psychology that is different from the way they are used in everyday language. Everyone spends some time extrovert-

ing and some time introverting. Don’t confuse Introversion with shyness or reclusiveness. They are not related.”

Extroverts like getting their energy from active involvement in events and having a lot of different activities. They are excited when they are around people. Extroverts like moving into action and making things happen. Extroverts often want to talk out loud with others about a problem they are dealing with. Introverts, on the other hand, receive their energy from dealing with the ideas, pictures, memories, and reactions that are inside their own head. They prefer doing things alone or with someone they feel comfortable with. Introverts always take time to reflect so that they have a clear idea of what they will do when they decide to act. When considering these descriptions of extroversion and introversion, the reader can easily see how either set of qualities might be beneficial to a future teacher.

Which personality types drop out?

The overall attrition rate for all students enrolled in the music education degree program for the four classes that graduated was just under 30 percent. Every personality trait was represented in this figure but not in equal proportions.

Introversion positively correlated with higher rates of attrition from the music education degree. Over 55 percent of the introverts (24 of the 43 enrolled) dropped out or switched degrees while only 31 percent of the extroverts (33 out of 106) dropped or switched over the same time period. Why did fewer introverts make it through the music education program and go on to be teachers? It is not clear, but a possible reason for this could be that introverts prefer working by themselves and sometimes forget to check their ideas with the outside world. This could potentially hinder an introvert’s desire to work collaboratively. Working collaboratively is a key component in most teacher training programs today and a desirable trait for potential school employers.

Students identified with the perceiving trait also had higher attrition rates than those with the judging trait. The findings from this research showed that “P”’s dropped out of or switched from the music education major at a 39 percent rate while “J”’s averaged 27 percent. One can only speculate at this point on the various factors that may have influenced these students to drop out or switch from the music education program, but the traits associated with the perceiver type personality may be relevant here.

When combining the perceiving (P) and the introvert (I) type qualities, for example an INFP or an ISTP, the attrition rate was also high. Fifty percent of the participants in this study who were both “I” and “P” dropped out or switched majors from music education. Introverts tend to be reflective, reserved and private. Introverts recharge their batteries by being alone with their thoughts. Perceivers prefer an environment that is unstructured, and like to keep their options open when making decisions. Consequently, the introvert/perceiver may be drained by being in front of a large classroom of children all day and dislike the imposed structure of their school teaching situation. There are obviously other variables besides personality type that enter into a decision to switch major. But a degree program that puts majors in front of classroom students for practice teaching sessions and requires majors to conform to the cooperating teacher’s classroom structure may adversely affect the introvert/perceiver’s desire to continue in the program.



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Which personalities are drawn to teaching?

Obviously, there is a wide range of personalities represented within music teaching and within the teaching profession as a whole. There are many successful teachers representing each of the 16 Myers-Briggs personality types, but some types do seem to be attracted to teaching more than others. This and other research shows that certain personality types are drawn to particular majors. The ENFJ (Extrovert-iNtuitive-Feeling-Judging), ESFJ (Extrovert-Sensing-Feeling-Judging) and INFJ (Introvert-iNtuitive-Feeling-Judging) types were the three most common personalities identified in this sample comprising 62 percent of the music education majors studied. Each of these personality types has "teaching" listed as one possible career preferences according to Paul Tieger's book, *Do What You Are: Discover the Perfect Career for You Through the Secrets of Personality Type*. This classic text on personality and career choice has been used for many years by career counselors. The beneficial traits for teaching of the ENFJ type such as leadership, empathy to others, decisiveness, and so on, were described earlier in this article, but how do the ESFJ and the INFJ types compare?

The ESFJ is warm-hearted, popular, and conscientious. They tend to put the needs of others over their own needs. An ESFJ feels a strong sense of responsibility and duty and values traditions and security. They are interested in serving others, but need positive reinforcement to feel good about themselves. The INFJ type is extremely intuitive about people. They are natural nurturers; patient, devoted and protective. They make loving parents and usually have high expectations of their children, and push them to be the best that they can be. In the workplace, the INFJ usually shows up in areas where they can be creative and somewhat independent. They have a natural affinity for the arts. INFJs can also be found in service-oriented professions.

A key trait shared by all three of these types (ENFJ, ESFJ, and INFJ) is a desire to serve others or a natural inclination for nurturing. This serving/nurturing

component is obviously a desirable trait for an educator. It is also important to note that all three types have the "judging" trait which means they desire closure in the decision making process. It simply may be that coming to a decision quickly is part and parcel with the teaching profession in general and choir directing in particular. Music students identified as ENFJ, INFJ, or ESFJ who show interest in teaching probably should be encouraged to pursue this. High school directors with students who fall into these categories may even want to give these students opportunities to try short teaching episodes with peers or younger musicians within the program to see if teaching is a good fit for them.

Regardless of what personality type a potential music director may be, knowing their preferences for interacting with the outside world as determined by a personality assessment can provide keen insight into who they are as a potential teacher. This can be an effective tool for both future music teachers and educators working with students who are in the process of deciding on what major to pick or what career to go into after college. Choir directors often have a strong influence on life decisions made by their choir members including what major to select in college. The study of personality traits through the Myers-Briggs Personality Type test can provide important

information and insight for a potential music education major. Hopefully, the information shared in this article can aid in helping all of us understand our preferences for interacting with each other and the world around us.

Resources and Links

- The Myers-Briggs Foundation, MBPTI Basics, www.myers-briggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/
- PersonalityPage.com, "Common Careers for Personality Types," www.personalitypage.com/careers.html
- Paul D. Tieger and Barbara Baron, *Do What You Are: Discover the Perfect Career for You Through the Secrets of Personality Type* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2007)

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