



A Pilot Study of Music Teacher Identity: Towards an Eight-Stage Career Trajectory Model

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Abstract

Music educators often navigate a dual professional identity shaped simultaneously by artistic and pedagogical roles. This exploratory pilot study examines the relationship between professional identity and career stages among Hungarian music teachers. While existing career models often assume linear progression, less attention has been given to how professional identity evolves across these stages in music education. This study proposes an eight-stage career trajectory model based on established life-course frameworks. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the limited sample size, the proposed model should be interpreted as a preliminary heuristic framework rather than a fully validated career model. Composite indices were created to measure teacher identity and integrated musician-teacher identity. The results indicate that the “active development” stage is dominant across different levels of professional experience, suggesting that career progression does not follow a strictly linear pattern. Furthermore, both identity dimensions showed only minor differences across career stages, indicating a relatively stable professional self-concept. Although the relationship between career stages and professional identity was one of the central aims of this study, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than conclusive. Due to the small sample size and the cross-sectional design, the results provide only preliminary indications of how professional identity may be maintained, negotiated, or challenged across different career stages. Future longitudinal research is needed to examine these developmental patterns more systematically. These findings support a non-linear interpretation of career development and highlight the importance of integrating artistic and pedagogical identities in music teacher education.

Keywords: career trajectory; music teacher; professional identity; teacher identity

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INTRODUCTION

The professional identity of music educators is shaped by a unique interplay between two deeply embedded domains: music performance and pedagogy. While many music teachers are trained as performers, they are simultaneously expected to adopt and internalise a pedagogical iden-

tity—often without explicit institutional guidance on how to reconcile or integrate these roles. This dual expectation raises critical questions about how music teachers experience and negotiate their identities over the course of their careers.

Our pilot study, conducted through a structured questionnaire among elementary music school teachers, investigates how

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music teachers construct their professional identity across career stages and how these relate to one another. By analysing their self-perceptions across career stages, we aim to develop a theoretical framework for understanding professional identity as an evolving, context-dependent process in music education.

This study addresses the following research questions: 1. How do music teachers position themselves within career stages? 2. How do they construct their professional identity as teachers and musicians? 3. How do career stages relate to identity development?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Teacher career model

Theories of career development conceptualize the teaching career in different ways. Some emphasize the accumulation of professional experience (Bolam, 1990), while others describe a progression from teacher-centeredness to child-centeredness (Berliner, 1988). Life-course models, such as those proposed by Sikes et al. (1985) and Burke et al. (1987), suggest that teaching careers follow an upward trajectory toward a career peak, followed by a downward stage. Day et al. (2006) expand on this by proposing an undulating trajectory, characterized by cycles of adaptation to personal and professional challenges. These life-course models are categorised by Orgoványi-Gajdos (2019) (Table 1).

Our research draws particularly on the models of Sikes et al. (1985) and Burke

et al. (1987). Sikes et al. (1985) see a steady ascent from the start of a career until the individual reaches a career peak. During the ascent, the individual's identity and commitment are consolidated; they become open to new challenges and even seek them, thus reaching the career peak. Thereafter, they enter a descent branch, and in the course of the termination, both well-being and disillusionment may be realized. Burke et al. (1987) start their model from the training stage, followed by the initial stage. Following the development of competence, a passionate and growing stage of frustration and stagnation also appears in his model, followed by the career wind-down and exit stage. He stresses that the influence of family and institutions is of paramount importance in career socialisation. Based on these two models, we have developed our own extended model, consisting of the following stages: training stage, initial stage, active development stage, career peak, discouragement, stagnation, professional disengagement and exit stage. While inspired by the bell-curve trajectory, our model aligns more closely with undulating models that reflect dynamic interactions among identity, motivation, and external circumstances (Day et al., 2006).

Our categories are based on subjectively perceived career trajectories and are structured similarly to fluctuating career models (Figure 1). Music teachers who taught alongside their higher education studies were included in the training stage. We considered the initial stage to comprise

Table 1. Categorisation of career models. Source: Orgoványi-Gajdos, 2019.

Category	Description	Model
Horizontal model	a straightforward development model; experience is gained, routine work, no descending branches	Bolam, 1990
Upward-sloping model	straightforward progression, from novice to master teacher, from self-centred to student-centred	Berliner, 1988
Bell-shaped model	the arc of the track goes up to the highest point and then gives a resting arc	Sikes et al., 1985 Burke et al., 1987
Undulating trajectory models	adapting to challenges	Day et al., 2006

the first three years following the acquisition of a higher education teaching qualification. This was followed by the active development stage, in which teachers perceive development in some area of their work, whether in competition preparation, methodological enrichment, or teaching children with difficulties. We linked the career peak category to competition results and various state, regional, or local recognitions.

The stage of reconsideration can occur not only among those starting their careers but also among those already established in the profession; this category includes teachers who imagine their future work in a field independent of music and/or teaching. We classified as stagnant those teachers who feel stuck in their work, performing everyday tasks without feeling the need for further development. The stage of distancing from the profession

may relate to reconsideration, changes in family life (e.g., having children or caring for parents), or preparation for leaving the profession. The exit stage primarily included those approaching retirement, although temporary career leavers could also be classified here, for example colleagues on maternity leave. These categories do not represent objectively measured career positions. Rather, they reflect participants' self-perceptions of their professional situations at the time of data collection. To operationalise these stages, participants were provided with written descriptions of each career stage and were asked to select the category that best reflected their current professional situation. Consequently, the stages represent self-perceived career positions rather than objectively measured career statuses or researcher-assigned categories.

As the arrows in Figure 1 indicate,

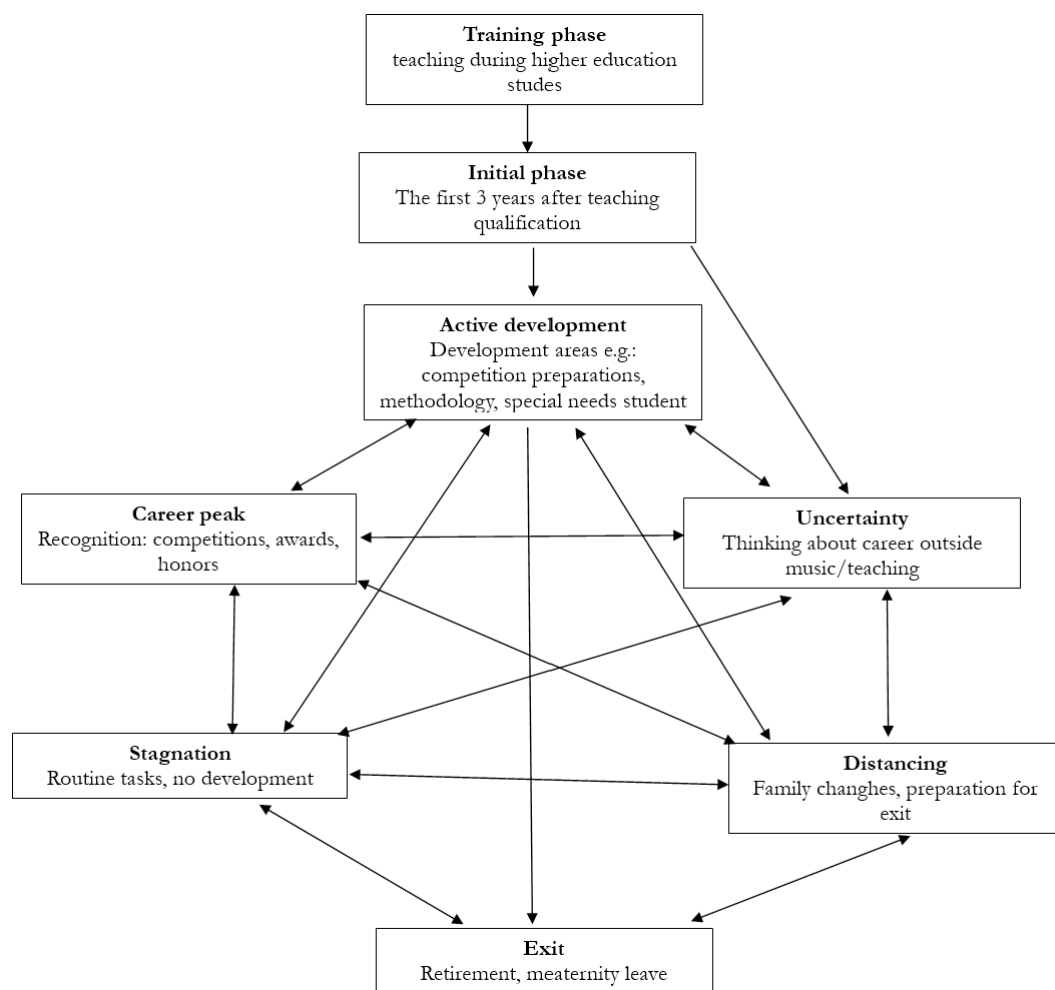


Figure 1. Career path stages of music teachers (authors' own elaboration based on the literature)

individuals may enter different stages in multiple ways, and these stages do not follow a strictly linear sequence. The placement of the text boxes does not imply a hierarchical relationship.

The proposed eight-stage framework should be interpreted as a preliminary analytical model emerging from the present pilot study. It is intended to support the interpretation of music teachers' self-perceived career trajectories rather than to represent a fully validated developmental sequence. Future studies involving larger, more diverse samples are needed to test the framework's empirical validity and transferability.

Conceptualising Identity

Identity, in a broad sense, refers to how individuals define themselves in relation to their roles, responsibilities, and social context. Several schools of thought have addressed the definition of identity, giving rise to both psychological and sociological approaches (Bögre, 2020).

In addition to structural interpretations, identity is increasingly understood as a dynamic and processual phenomenon (Bögre, 2020; Stachel, 2007). When examining teacher and musician identities, the sociological approach appears particularly appropriate. Even if individuals possess strong predispositions toward teaching and/or musical performance, both require continuous development. As Bárdos (2014, p. 20) notes, "in teaching, a teacher may be an intuitive layperson, a scholar-teacher, a performer, or a craftsman. Ideally, a teacher is capable of all four, yet maintains a certain distance from each."

Research on identity extends to professional domains, the opportunities inherent in communities, and the process of becoming a teacher (Fitzgerald, 2020). Teacher identity can be interpreted as a form of self-expression shaped by the work environment, life situation, and broader structural contexts. For music educators, active musical experiences contribute to emotional well-being and strengthen teacher self-definition, while performing ac-

tivities are closely intertwined with teaching practice (Chua & Welch, 2023; Pető & Váradi, 2024).

The development of teacher identity is a long-term process in an individual's life. The formation of musical attitudes is strongly present in both musician training and higher education teacher training (Dubaz-Bükülmez et al., 2022); moreover, within the Hungarian institutional system, it is already rooted in primary education and further intensified in secondary education. As a result, students tend to define themselves as performers who may also engage in teaching (Chua, 2018). Szabó et al. (2023) show that in Hungary, career choice toward the performing arts was stronger prior to the introduction of the Bologna system than after it. In the Bologna system, prospective music teachers appear to make more conscious career decisions. This aligns with earlier research (Freer & Bennett, 2012) and highlights the significant role of training institutions in shaping teacher identity, supported by mentoring systems and role models (Chua & Welch, 2023; Pellegrino et al., 2021).

Chua (2018) presents discourses addressing which identity should take precedence. In relation to the emphasis on teacher identity, it is important to note that musicians often need to be prepared for teaching in order to meet future career demands (Roberts, 2004; Bouij, 2007; Dawe, 2007; Ballantyne et al., 2012). Richards (2023) highlights the multiple dimensions of teacher identity and emphasizes the crucial role of educational institutions in its formation.

The identity development of early-career music teachers is a malleable process shaped by contextual influences, biographical factors, and lived experiences (Pellegrino et al., 2021). The literature also raises the question of whether teacher and performer identities are in conflict or rather adaptable and mutually constitutive (Wagoner, 2015).

Teacher and musician roles coexist and often form a unified professional identity (Bernard, 2005; Chua, 2018; Du-

baz-Bükülmez et al., 2022). Potential role conflicts may arise primarily from institutional constraints (Bremmer et al., 2021). While the two identities differ—teacher identity emphasizing pedagogical aspects and musician identity emphasizing artistic dimensions—they are difficult to separate into distinct components. Due to their interconnected nature, they must be examined together (Dubaz-Bükülmez et al., 2022).

Teacher identity and musician identity are analytically distinguishable yet experientially intertwined. In this sense, musician-teacher identity is conceptualized not as a third, separate identity category, but rather as an integrative professional configuration through which artistic and pedagogical dimensions are continuously negotiated and mutually reinforced.

As music educators are trained in both artistic and pedagogical domains, they are able to communicate authentically with their students in both areas. Arts educators may therefore serve not only as transmitters of experience, but also as bridges between artistic and pedagogical practice, simultaneously embodying artistic and pedagogical expertise (Dubaz-Bükülmez et al., 2022).

The theoretical framework presented integrates life-course career models with identity theory to explore the complex interplay between music performance and pedagogy. By situating teacher identity within broader psychological and sociological discourses, and by acknowledging the dynamic duality of musician and educator roles, this framework provides a conceptual basis for understanding the multifaceted professional realities of music teachers. This integrated model also supports the development of research instruments and the interpretation of findings in studies addressing professional identity in music education.

Based on the literature reviewed, we primarily consider those with a musician identity to be those who interpret themselves as performers/artists. We classified those with a teacher identity as those who consider their self-definition as a teacher

as primary. Those with a musician-teacher identity have integrated the definitions of the two categories, their artistic and pedagogical activities are both a prominent area of their work, and they play an active role in both areas. The Hungarian education system is characterized by the fact that the teaching master's degree based on the artistic master diploma grants an artist-teacher qualification. This may influence the self-classification of those completing it.

Thus, teacher identity and musician identity are treated as analytically distinguishable but empirically intertwined dimensions of a broader musician-teacher identity.

For the purposes of this study, teacher identity is understood as the professional self-concept grounded primarily in pedagogical commitment, instructional responsibility, and educational values. Musician identity refers to the professional self-concept rooted in artistic practice, musical performance, and creative engagement. While these two identity dimensions are analytically distinguishable, they are often experientially intertwined in music education contexts. In this sense, musician-teacher identity is conceptualized not as a third independent identity category, but as an integrative professional configuration in which artistic and pedagogical dimensions are continuously negotiated and mutually reinforced.

Operationally, teacher identity was measured through self-report attitudinal items related to teaching values and professional commitment, whereas musician identity was assessed through indicators of active musical engagement, including performance activity and ensemble leadership. The integrated musician-teacher identity was examined through items reflecting the perceived inseparability and mutual embeddedness of these two professional domains.

METHODS

The study is exploratory in nature and should be interpreted as a pilot inves-

tigation. Accordingly, all findings should be interpreted as exploratory tendencies rather than conclusive evidence regarding music teachers' identity development. This exploratory, cross-sectional study employed a quantitative survey design to investigate music teachers' professional identity and its relationship to career trajectories. The conceptual framework was primarily informed by Pellegrino's (2009) dynamic theory of musician identity and further grounded in the work of Chua (2018) and Dubaz-Bükülmez et al. (2022). The career stage model was adapted from Sikes et al. (1985) and Burke et al. (1987), with modifications inspired by Orgoványi-Gajdos (2019). Given the exploratory design and limited sample size, the eight-stage model was applied as a heuristic analytical framework rather than as a validated developmental sequence.

The research was conducted using purposive sampling of music teachers from five primary music schools in a Hungarian school district as part of a professional development training program. Music teachers voluntarily enrolled in the school district's professional development day and selected from several available programs according to their interests. By participating in the development program, the music teachers agreed to fill out the questionnaire and were given detailed information about the use of the data provided to us and the ethical guidelines. We assured the respondents that their data would only be processed in connection with the research, in an anonymous and aggregated form, and would not be disclosed to third parties. Those who did not wish to participate in the research had the option to refuse to fill out the questionnaire or to interrupt the process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Due to the small sample size, composite indices were created instead of conducting factor analysis. The teacher index contains explicitly teacher statements, and the integrated musician-teacher index contains items that integrate the two roles.

Samples

Participants were selected through purposive sampling from five public primary-level music schools within a school district in Hungary. All participants took part in a regional professional development training program. The questionnaire was administered in paper format at the training venue.

The final sample consisted of 26 certified music teachers (7 males, 19 females). Most participants (57.7%) were married, 19.2% were in a committed relationship, 15.4% were single, and 7.7% were divorced. Approximately 88% of the respondents came from non-musician families. However, 38.5% reported that one of their parents had a general teaching background, and 7.7% reported that one of their parents was also a music teacher. This suggests that parental influence related to teaching—though not necessarily musical training—may play a role in career choice (Molnár-Tamus & Sz. Fodor, 2024).

In terms of professional qualifications, all respondents held a degree in music education, while 42% also had formal training in music performance. Regarding professional experience, 38.5% had been in the field for 21–30 years. The most commonly taught instrument was the recorder, which is frequently used by both brass and woodwind instructors during preparatory training. Consequently, recorder instruction was prevalent across instrumental specializations.

Instrumentation

The research instrument consisted of seven sections:

Demographics and background: Included items on personal and occupational data, as well as family background in music or education.

Artistic involvement: Explored respondents' roles in school-based music ensembles (e.g., choir, wind band, string orchestra) as a measure of artistic identity.

Career choice factors: Assessed influences on music career decisions, including family, teachers, peers, and intrinsic

motivation.

Motivations for teaching: Focused on the timing and drivers behind the decision to pursue music teaching.

Career trajectory: Built on the adapted career stage models to assess participants' perceived career stage (e.g., training, active development, stagnation, peak, descent).

Professional identity: Incorporated items from Chua (2018) and Dubaz-Bükülmez et al. (2022) to evaluate the dual identity of teacher and musician. The internal consistency of the teacher identity scale was relatively low ($\alpha = .45$), indicating limited homogeneity among items. This may reflect the multidimensional nature of teacher identity and the exploratory design of the study. Consequently, findings related to this scale should be interpreted cautiously and regarded as indicative rather than conclusive. Furthermore, the identity items were adapted from previously published instruments and applied for the first time in the Hungarian music education context. Consequently, the present study should also be viewed as an initial examination of the scale's applicability in this context.

Perceptions of teaching: Assessed attitudes and beliefs about the teaching profession.

Sections related to career choice and motivation are not analysed in the present study. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items (4-point), multiple-choice, and open-ended questions. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of music teachers' careers provides valuable insights into the dynamic and multifaceted nature of professional identity formation. To frame our investigation, we applied a hybrid theoretical model integrating the career-stage frameworks of Sikes et al. (1985) and Burke et al. (1987), further refined through the fluctuating, non-linear perspective proposed by Orgoványi-Gajdos (2019). This model

delineates eight distinct stages: training, entry, active development, career peak, discouragement, stagnation, detachment, and exit. Career stages were measured through self-classification. Participants were provided with descriptions of each stage and asked to select the category that best represented their current professional situation.

Based on self-reported career stage classifications from 26 participants, four stages were identified as dominant: active development ($n = 17$), stagnation ($n = 5$), career peak ($n = 3$), and entry stage ($n = 1$). Remarkably, the active development stage emerged as predominant across nearly all experience brackets (0–5, 6–10, 11–20, 21–30, 31–40, and 41+ years), including among those with over three decades of teaching experience.

To further explore the relationship between career stage and years of professional experience, a cross-tabulation analysis was conducted. Due to the small sample size ($N = 26$) and the high proportion of low expected cell counts, the results are interpreted as exploratory patterns rather than statistically generalizable findings ($\chi^2(15) = 24.511, p = .057$). The analysis indicates that the “active development” stage is dominant across multiple experience groups. A substantial proportion of respondents (65.4%) across nearly all career phases identified themselves as being in this stage, including those with more than 20 or even 30 years of professional experience. This pattern suggests that perceived professional development among music teachers is not strictly tied to years of experience. Instead, the findings point toward a more dynamic and non-linear career trajectory, supporting models that conceptualize career development as fluctuating rather than sequential according to the model of Day et al. (2006).

This finding may be interpreted as less consistent with strictly linear and stage-based career models, suggesting that perceived professional growth is not strictly tied to tenure. Several contextual factors may account for this sustained

developmental orientation. First, the constantly evolving classroom composition—including increased diversity and fluctuating socio-emotional needs—demands adaptive pedagogical responses. Second, the rising proportion of students with special educational needs and disabilities presents continuous methodological and theoretical challenges, especially for educators lacking specialised training in inclusive practices. Third, shifting student motivation patterns and the emergence of highly talented learners require ongoing innovation, often prompting teachers to pursue competitions and public showcases, which can enhance professional recognition at institutional and national levels. The persistence of the active development stage suggests that professional growth among music teachers may be conceptualised as an ongoing identity project rather than a sequence of age-related stages. Because music teachers continuously negotiate artistic, pedagogical, and institutional expectations, professional identity construction may remain open-ended throughout the entire career.

This interpretation aligns with Day et al.'s (2006) conception of the teaching career as an undulating trajectory shaped by cycles of professional challenge and renewal, rather than a fixed progression toward a singular peak. Crucially, in the specific context of music education, the dual artistic and pedagogical demands of the profession may sustain a distinctive form of developmental openness: the musician-teacher is simultaneously accountable to evolving artistic standards and shifting pedagogical expectations, which together prevent the foreclosure of professional identity that might otherwise characterise later career stages. This structural feature of the music teaching profession may explain why even highly experienced teachers in the present sample self-identified as being in the active development stage rather than in career wind-down or exit phases — a pattern that warrants further investigation in larger, longitudinal studies.

Importantly, the presence or absence

of such motivating contextual elements—such as talented students—appears to influence whether teachers self-identify as being at a 'career peak'. In this light, perceived career progression is not necessarily chronological but rather shaped by episodic, relational, and institutional factors. These findings lend stronger support to the ripple or oscillating model of career development (Orgoványi-Gajdos, 2019), which better accounts for the subjectively perceived, non-linear nature of music teachers' professional journeys than traditional bell-curve models.

Adaptation to different challenges (Day et al., 2006) supports the idea that the music teacher career is not characterized by linear succession, but rather by an undulating career path (Orgoványi-Gajdos, 2019). This interpretation can contribute to the development of the content of music teacher training and the mentoring system. Based on this, we can indicate that different forms of music teacher support are necessary throughout the career, not only during the training and initial stages.

The proposed eight-stage trajectory should not be regarded as a validated career model but rather as a preliminary conceptual framework emerging from the present pilot study.

Musician and teacher identity

Musician identity was operationalised through several indicators in our questionnaire (Chua, 2018; Dubaz-Bükülmez et al., 2022). First, we examined whether the teachers who completed the questionnaire engaged in musical activities in addition to their teaching work. Two subcategories were created to distinguish between professional musical activity and occasional artistic engagement. Of the respondents, five were professionally active musicians, and all but seven reported regular concert activity.

We also investigated participation in institutional ensembles as a measurable indicator of musician identity. Seven respondents led school-based ensembles, including string orchestras, cello ensembles,

guitar orchestras, wind bands, and choirs. Based on Dubaz-Bükülmez, et al. (2022), teachers' involvement in ensembles was categorized into three areas: ensemble training ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.38$), arranging existing works ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.11$), and composing original works ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.15$). The findings suggest that teaching-related ensemble tasks were more characteristic than composition-related activities. Creative compositional activity appeared relatively limited, which may partly reflect the fact that none of the ensemble leaders had formal training in composition. The comparatively low level of original composition suggests that conducting and arranging activities may serve primarily pedagogical rather than self-expressive artistic functions.

According to the literature, active musical activity within and outside the institution is important for music teachers, as it strengthens their teaching practice (Chua, 2018; Dubaz-Bükülmez et al., 2022; Pető & Váradi, 2024). This may indicate that professional identity functions as a relatively stable element.

To measure teacher identity, a 12-item scale was compiled based on validated instruments (Chua, 2018; Dubaz-Bükülmez et al., 2022). Respondents were asked to indicate on a 4-point Likert scale how much they felt the statements applied to them (1. not at all, 2. rather not, 3. rather yes, 4. completely). Mean and standard deviation values are presented rounded to two decimal places. In general, our respondents are proud to be music teachers and do not regret their choice to teach (Table 2). Overall, the results suggest that participants possess a strong and positive identification with their role as music teachers. Respondents expressed high levels of pride in their profession ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.58$) and a strong belief in the interconnectedness of teaching and musicianship (e.g., "Teaching music is part of being a musician," $M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.59$). Notably, teacher identity was somewhat more salient than musician identity, with the item "First the teacher, second the musician" ($M = 3.23$,

$SD = 0.71$) receiving higher endorsement than "First the musician, second the teacher" ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 0.88$).

Participants demonstrated difficulty distinguishing between their identities as musicians and educators, as evidenced by the low mean for "I separate the two identities" ($M = 1.83$, $SD = 0.96$). Furthermore, regret related to career choice was minimal, with "I regret that I chose to become a music teacher" scoring the lowest among all items ($M = 1.22$, $SD = 0.52$).

When asked whether they would choose the same profession again, 24 of the 26 respondents (92.3%) reported that they would still become music teachers. This strong endorsement may reflect a high level of professional commitment and career satisfaction, likely contributing to the predominance of the active development career stage observed in the broader sample.

Identity and career path

To explore the relationship between career stage and teacher identity, mean identity scores were compared across career stage categories. The results show only minor differences between groups. Teachers in the active development stage reported similar levels of teacher identity ($M = 21.79$) compared to those in the career peak ($M = 22.00$) and stagnation stages ($M = 22.00$).

These findings suggest that teacher identity is relatively stable across career stages and does not follow a strictly linear pattern. This relative stability suggests that music teacher identity is not supplanted by successive role configurations across career stages but is instead continuously reinterpreted within changing professional contexts — a pattern consistent with Wenger's (1998) notion of identity as an ongoing negotiation of meaning within communities of practice, and with Pellegrino's (2009) argument that musician-teacher identity functions as a dynamic, integrative construct rather than a static role assignment.

Mean scores of the integrated musician-teacher identity also showed only mi-

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of music teacher identity items

Item	N	M	Std. dev.
I am proud to be a music teacher	25	3.60	0.58
Teaching music is part of being a musician	25	3.48	0.59
Being a musician is part of being a music teacher.	25	3.28	0.74
First the teacher, second the musician	26	3.23	0.71
I wanted to be a music teacher, no doubt.	25	2.92	0.91
I identify myself as an art teacher	23	2.91	0.90
I wanted to be a teacher, no doubt.	25	2.52	1.05
First the musician, second the teacher	24	2.42	0.88
I didn't want to be a music teacher, but I am one.	25	2.24	1.20
I separate the two identities	24	1.83	0.96
I see myself more as an administrator.	23	1.61	0.94
I regret that I chose to become a music teacher.	23	1.22	0.52

nor differences across career stages. While slightly higher values were observed in the career peak ($M = 10.67$) and stagnation stages ($M = 10.40$) compared to the active development stage ($M = 9.47$), these differences remain modest. This pattern further supports the assumption that professional identity among music teachers does not follow a strictly linear developmental trajectory.

These patterns point to a broader reconceptualisation of professional development in music education: rather than a linear accumulation of expertise culminating in a stable career peak, the music teaching career may be better understood as a series of recurring negotiations between the self as musician and the self as educator. Each new professional challenge – whether pedagogical, institutional, or artistic – potentially reactivates this negotiation, sustaining a sense of ongoing development even in later career phases. This dynamic helps explain why the active development stage remained dominant across experience levels in the present sample, and why identity scores showed little systematic variation across career stages.

From a theoretical standpoint, the stability of teacher identity across career stages is consistent with Pellegrino's (2009) dynamic model, which posits that musician-teacher identity is not a fixed endpoint but an ongoing process of negotiation

between artistic and pedagogical commitments. Rather than undergoing categorical identity shifts as they move through career stages, music teachers appear to continuously re-anchor their professional self-concept within a stable but adaptive framework. This interpretation is further supported by Chua and Welch's (2023) lifelong perspective, which emphasises that identity formation among music educators is characterised by recursive cycles of consolidation and re-evaluation rather than linear progression. The relative convergence of identity scores across the active development, career peak, and stagnation stages may therefore reflect not a lack of differentiation but rather the integrative resilience of the musician-teacher identity configuration: even under conditions of stagnation or diminished professional motivation, the core identity structure remains coherent. This finding has practical implications for mentoring and professional development, suggesting that identity-sustaining interventions may be beneficial not only in the early career stages but throughout the professional lifespan.

The present study contributes to a growing body of research demonstrating that music teacher identity is neither fixed nor unidimensional. Rather than progressing through the discrete, age-bound stages proposed by Sikes et al. (1985) and Burke et al. (1987), participants navigated

a more fluid professional landscape in which artistic and pedagogical commitments continuously intersected and mutually reinforced one another. This finding extends earlier career-stage frameworks by highlighting the extent to which subjective identity experience – rather than chronological tenure – determines how music teachers position themselves professionally.

The conceptual framework of role identity (Bögre, 2020) and symbolic interactionism further illuminated how professional self-concepts evolve in response to social expectations, institutional contexts, and personal values. The professional identity of music teachers cannot be clearly separated into distinct musician and teacher components: even when respondents explicitly identify themselves as teachers, they remain actively involved in musical activities. In this context, these findings support a constructivist view of professional identity, aligning with contemporary theories that emphasize the fluid, context-dependent, and evolving nature of identity (Pellegrino et al., 2021). Consistent with Chua (2018) and Dubaz-Bükülmez et al. (2022), the notion of a unified musician-teacher identity proved essential for understanding how these dual roles coexist and sometimes conflict. Participants indicated that artistic engagement (e.g., performance or ensemble direction) reinforced their pedagogical motivation and emotional well-being, supporting previous research linking artistic activity to teacher identity reinforcement (Pellegrino et al., 2021).

The findings suggest that the integration of teacher and musician identities is facilitated by personal reflection, institutional recognition, and opportunities for artistic expression within educational settings. This highlights the importance of designing teacher education and professional development programs that explicitly support the development and integration of professional identities. If music education students and beginners see the career options available to them, they are more likely to rely on the resources of the music education community (Wenger, 1998) and

its retaining power. This can reduce the chance of dropping out even after the active mentoring period (Simon, 2019).

Taken together, the findings suggest that professional identity and career development among music teachers are best understood as dynamic and mutually constitutive processes. Rather than progressing through fixed and age-related stages, music teachers appear to continuously reinterpret their artistic and pedagogical identities in response to changing professional, institutional, and biographical circumstances.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size ($N = 26$) restricts the generalizability of the findings and limits the statistical power of the analyses. The results should therefore be interpreted as exploratory patterns rather than definitive conclusions. Second, the use of purposive sampling from a single school district introduces potential selection bias, as participants were drawn from a specific regional and institutional context. Third, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for causal inferences or the examination of identity development over time; longitudinal research would be needed to explore how professional identity and career stages evolve across teachers' careers.

Fourth, the internal consistency of the teacher identity scale was relatively low (Cronbach's $\alpha = .45$), which introduces uncertainty regarding the precision of the composite index. This limitation may partly reflect the multidimensional nature of professional identity, the exploratory character of the instrument, and the small sample size. Accordingly, findings related to the composite index should be interpreted cautiously. Future research should employ validated instruments with stronger psychometric properties.

Finally, the career-stage model proposed in this study is preliminary and based on self-reported categorization; participants' placement within a given stage

reflects subjective perception rather than an objective assessment of career progression. Future studies with larger and more diverse samples, ideally using mixed-methods and longitudinal designs, would help to validate and refine the eight-stage trajectory model proposed here.

CONCLUSION

This pilot study examined the relationship between music teacher identity and career stages using an eight-stage career trajectory model. The findings suggest that music teachers' career development does not follow a strictly linear pattern, as the active development stage was dominant across different experience levels. Furthermore, both teacher identity and integrated musician-teacher identity appeared relatively stable across career stages, supporting the view that professional identity in music education is dynamic yet coherent. These results highlight the importance of considering non-linear career models and integrating artistic and pedagogical roles to understand music teachers' professional development. While the findings are exploratory given the small sample size, they provide a foundation for future research with larger, more diverse samples. The study contributes to emerging discussions on non-linear professional development and the integration of artistic and pedagogical identities in music education. From a practical perspective, the proposed framework may support teacher education programmes, mentoring systems, and professional development initiatives by helping music educators recognise different phases of their professional trajectories and the identity-related challenges associated with them. Such reflection may contribute to professional sustainability, resilience, and long-term career satisfaction among music teachers.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki

and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Debrecen (REC No. 6/2025).

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