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M4811a

Scholarly Reflection #4: A Democratic Purpose for Music Education

What does it mean to have a democratic purpose for music education? Woodford (2005) poses this question and answers it by stating that music education can contribute to “wider intellectual and political conversations about the nature and significance of music” (p. xi). Currently in Ontario, public school education has suffered several cuts to teachers and funding with the Ford Conservative government in place. What Woodford (2005) explains is that having a political philosophy can secure a place for music education in public schools. In a way, it can save music education from becoming extinct. What I find interesting is that many music teachers, like myself, have never viewed themselves as “champions of the public good” (Woodford, 2005, p. xi) but simply as music teachers. I never thought about the possibility to use my role as an educator to help students become democratic citizens of our community. So I’ve been asking myself this question: what are the implications of having a democratic purpose for music education, and how does it impact community?

According to Woodford (2005), “democracy is, or ought to be, the attempted expression of our fondest hopes for the improvement of the human condition” (p. xv). After looking up the definition of democracy in the dictionary, a few statements stood out. “A state of society characterized by tolerance... to develop freely to his fullest capacity in a cooperative community” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary). The words that stuck out to me here were *tolerance* and *cooperative community*. I am not so sure I am convinced that democracy

is about tolerating one another but instead respecting and attempting to understand our differences and that our strength lies in our diversity. Having a culture that celebrates diversity and difference is something I want to bring into my music classroom. I don't want it to be built on tolerance, but instead acceptance and respect. To summarize, I hope to explore how having a democratic purpose in music education in my own teaching can create a place for everyone to feel included, heard, and accepted.

So what does it mean to create a cooperative community when talking about democracy? Let's first examine how music creates society. Martí (2018) explains how individual interactions happen through music and these individual interactions create society. Furthermore, it is then society who creates individuals. It becomes very cyclical. Martí (2018) goes on to further point out that we need identity, social order, and exchange in order to function socially, and music intersects through these three parameters. What is very interesting to me is that, "we, as individuals, would be incomprehensible without the constant exchange with other people" (Martí, 2018, p. 13). We need each other. Once again, our strength lies in our diversity - in one another. To go back to the point on connecting cooperative community to democracy, I have seen through my work with El Sistema Aeolian how community has the ability to stem from the exchanges and interactions we have with one another and how cooperation can help celebrate our differences. Using this philosophy in music education is important as "music provides one more source for symbolic interaction" (Martí, 2018, p. 15).

Yet, on the contrary, Baker (2014) argues that social interaction through music may not be all it is cracked up to be. Using El Sistema as an example of creating citizens through music, Baker (2014) questions if this program actually "prioritizes social action over musical goals" (p.

163). That is to say, is El Sistema really about quality process over quality product? As someone who currently teaches at the local El Sistema here in London, ON, I see the incredible social interactions and transformations happening through collective music making. Whether or not El Sistema originally served this particular purpose, or if it was more about needing support, adapting strategies to protect it, and securing the future of Venezuela (Baker, 2014), is not what I am arguing. I contend that it is true that orchestras, such as those that emerge from El Sistema, or choirs, as O'Toole (1993/1994) illustrates, all have the power to oppress and silence their students as a means to create beautiful and professional music. To combat this, it is our job as music educators to carry forward our political philosophies and democratic purpose to make sure that our students are indeed heard.

Another question remains: how do I as a music teacher incorporate social democracy into my lesson plans? How do I make it about the process and not the product? It is very easy to say that I am going to have a democratic music philosophy, but how exactly am I going to accomplish this? Woodford (2019) suggests that using improvisation and more importantly composition allows students to express themselves and also to criticize the world around them. It gives them a voice. As I had previously talked about surrounding the potential oppressive nature of ensembles, it is vital to give students a voice and allow them to contribute to the greater ensemble. The music and learning that occurs is about them, after all, and not your own personal agenda as the educator.

References

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