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Scholarly Reflection #3: Examining Democracy

Democracy is a broad term, particularly when we are applying it to a music education setting. Personally, I find it somewhat difficult to clearly establish what is meant by “democracy”, even though I know it is something I want to incorporate into my own teaching philosophy. One might say that they want to have democratic engagement in the music classroom, but what exactly is meant by that? What kind of democracy are we talking about? Why does music education have to be political in the first place? Certain democracies create a very specific type of citizens, as myself and others have learned through our own education experiences. Therefore, certain pedagogical democracies will create very specific types of students. In the words of Woodford, we need to ask ourselves “what kind of citizen” (2019, p. 28) we are referring to. We also must consider what type of community we would like in our music classroom, because isn’t making music just as much about musical engagement as it is citizenship?

Dewey (1897) points out the need for the idea of community to be present within our schools. For him, school should be a social institution that represents our present lives and engages the students in the process of living. Yet, Dewey claims we are doing the complete opposite by neglecting our schools as a form of community living and instead of focusing on vocational training (ie. getting a job). (Dewey, 1897). We are very outcome driven in education,

and this can become increasingly problematic in the music classroom. Why? Because music has the power to shape mindful, engaged democratic citizens, if we let it.

Let's examine what is meant by "democratic citizenship". The third model of democratic citizenship, as explained by Woodford (2019), is referred to as the justice-oriented citizen. In this model, the educational emphasis is to incorporate collective work that is related to the issues of the community (Woodford, 2019). For me, awareness, active learning, and engaged participation all come to mind when thinking about this model. If we, as music educators, are not exposing our students to these three things every day we are musicking together, then why are we teaching music in the first place? I contend that as music teachers, we teach students through the medium of music. But what we are ultimately teaching our students is not to be world-class musicians, although that may be one of the by-products, but instead to be engaged, contributing citizens of the community. Learning a new band piece, singing songs together, or mixing tracks is simply the way we are accomplishing this.

It is fascinating to explore the relationships between music and politics. As Love (2006) points out, there are two very specific types of democracy one must also consider when talking about musical democracy. The first type is aggregative democracy. It focuses on instrumental reason, institutionalized power, private interests, and competitions. The second type is deliberative democracy, which involves the citizen in past and present political issues. What is admirable about the latter is that it involves its citizens in the discourse and promotes inclusive communication. (Love, 2006). Yet, another type of democracy that Connolly (1999) points out is agonistic democracy: "a deep pluralism nourished by a generous ethos of engagement" (Connolly, 1999, p. 130). What this all boils down to is understanding which type of democracy

is most effective and necessary in music education, and establishing which one(s) you will incorporate into your teaching philosophy. I would like to suggest that it boils down to understanding why you might want community music in your classroom and what you might gain from it.

I've been asking myself: what does community music *truly* mean? Higgins (2012) defines it in three perspectives: "(1) music of a community, (2) communal music making, and (3) an active intervention between a music leader or facilitator and participants." (p. 3). To summarize, Higgins (2012) wants to promote leadership over authority and views community music as a "powerful medium for social and political change" (p. 32). Community music also creates what we might call cultural democracy, as Higgins (2012) points out. Cultural democracy is the recognition that there are many cultures in society and not simply one. It is also giving all of these unique cultures a voice, literally and metaphorically, in your teaching.

So, if we have (1) determined what kind of democracy we want in our music classrooms, (2) established the type of citizen we want out of our students, and (3) have acknowledged the implications (positive and negative) of community music, then I argue that we have created a space for not simply musical but furthermore personal and communal growth and development for our students and, ultimately, our community.

References

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