

Why Should Music Educators Care?

Advocating for a Culture of Community through Democracy in the Twenty-First

Century Music Classroom

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine music's potential to allow students to understand who they are, who they will become, and question the world around them. Included is a discussion of why it is worthwhile for music educators to examine the implications of advocating for their students' best interests, and most importantly why teachers should care about having a democratic purpose for music education. Lastly, the paper outlines how teachers might go about approaching this complex yet important concept in their music classrooms.

Introduction

What is *advocacy*? According to Dictionary.com (2019), advocacy is the act of pleading for, supporting, or recommending. What does this have to do with *music*? Plainly stated, music educators are advocates for their students. They plead for them, support them, and recommend their next steps in the music classroom. That is not to say that teachers in other disciplines are not advocates. All teachers ought to be advocates for themselves and their students. Yet, as Reimer (2002) explains, music is one basic way that humans can come to understand themselves and the world. That is to say that music educators have a specific and unique opportunity to allow students to shape their own learning experiences.

First of all, what is meant by *students' best interests* and why does it matter? Typically, the answer to this question is left up to the teacher who ultimately determines what these 'best interests' might look like. The job of music educators is, therefore, to construct a personal philosophy of teaching that can be used to make well-informed

decisions on behalf of their students. In the eyes of Reimer (2002), having a philosophy of music education helps individuals to develop their own natural responsiveness to the power of art and music.

Furthermore, Reimer (2002) claims that we need to be convinced of our philosophy's importance so that we can advocate for what our students need. Music has the potential to be a very unique, intimate, and personal experience, as music and art are the fundamental ways that we know ourselves (Reimer, 2002). However, as explained by Reimer (2002), it is not so easy to adhere to our educational philosophies while also advocating for our students and ourselves due to the complexity of its nature.

One way to assist with the constant struggle between one's teaching philosophy and educational outcomes is to examine how incorporating democratic musical engagement might help shape a culture of community in the music classroom. However, what exactly does this mean and what does it look like? Moreover, how does democracy tie into community?

Music can contribute to the formation of democratic citizenship. Democracy is not merely a political platform but "an ethical ideal and communal way of life" (Woodford, 2015, p. 2). Music also has the potential to form identity and create community (Love, 2006). Although democracy and community are not interchangeable with one another, they are closely related, as both ideas can advocate for a higher collective good. Dewey (1946) regarded democracy as the idea of community life itself. By creating community in their classrooms, music educators can use democracy as a tool to better advocate for themselves and their students. In other words, creating a musical community can help shape mindful, engaged democratic citizens.

What is Democracy?

In order to discuss what democracy might look like in the music classroom, we first need to define what kind of democracy we are referring to. Woodford (2005) states, “democracy is, or ought to be, the attempted expression of our fondest hopes for the improvement of the human condition” (p. xv). In the music classroom, this might translate to teachers attempting to engage their students in democratic and political discourse as to raise their awareness of themselves and the world around them. Democracy, according to Dewey (1939), involved the participation of every student in forming common social values. Certain democracies create very specific types of citizens. Therefore, certain pedagogical democracies will create very specific types of students, and is why music educators ought to question what type of democracy is in their students’ best interests.

So how does this apply to the music classroom? To answer this question, Love (2006) explains what *musical democracy* might look like. Musical democracy promotes “the ongoing creation of expansive individuals, citizens capable of performing democracy in public spaces open to any and all expressions of voices” (Love, 2006, p. 16). Musical democracy brings together all voices and can create a positive culture of community, if fostered correctly.

If music educators are to incorporate democratic values into their music classrooms, it is necessary to further explore the relationship between music and democracy. 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, critics of deliberative democracy, such as Connolly (1999), affirm what is known as agonistic democracy: “a deep pluralism nourished by a generous ethos of engagement” (Connolly, 1999, p. 130). The democracy that Connolly (1999) prefers is one that promotes self-artistry and autonomy, two integral factors of student-defined success and learning in the music classroom. However, as Connolly (1983) points out, the definition of democracy and citizenship are widely debated and no single definition will ever suffice. What this all boils down to is understanding which type of democracy is most effective and in students’ best interests, and establishing which one(s) educators deem appropriate to incorporate into their teaching philosophy.

Democratic Citizenship

To that point, let us examine what type of *democratic citizenship* might be in students’ best interests. According to Westheimer and Kahne (2004), there are three types of citizens to consider when defining what “good” citizenship looks like. The first type is the “personally responsible citizen” who is the law-abiding, honest citizen. The second type is the “participatory citizen” who takes on leadership roles in his or her community. Lastly is the “justice-oriented citizen” who critically questions social injustices in their community. (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). This last model of democratic citizenship is the ideal type of citizen according to Woodford (2019). In this model, the educational emphasis is to incorporate collective work that is related to the issues of the community

and social justice (Woodford, 2019). Some things that might come to mind are awareness, active learning, and engaged participation when thinking about the justice-oriented citizenship model. If music educators are not exposing their students to these three things every day when creating music together, then why teach music in the first place?

Music educators teach students more than how to create beautiful music with one another. Music educators have the chance to teach their students how to be justice-oriented citizens through music. That is ultimately what every type of teacher ought to do. Educators teach their students through the medium of their subject or discipline. What is unique about music, and the arts in general, is that it is socially, politically and culturally engaging. What music educators are ultimately teaching their 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 music educators are accomplishing this.

We might also ask ourselves: why does music education have to be political in the first place? We may think that democracy is not all that it is cracked up to be and that the music classroom is no place for politics. Yet, schools are inherently political as they are social institutions that reflect the values of wider society (Dewey, 1897). Dewey (1900) advocated for education to be a means to foster freedom of mind so that they have some sort of “conscious control over experience” (Woodford, 2015, p. 1). In order to deeply engage students, and hold them accountable in their own learning, music classrooms need to promote justice-oriented citizenship.

Community in the Music Classroom

By establishing what type of democracy educators want in the music classroom and the type of democratic citizenship they ought to promote, music educators can begin to create a space for not simply musical growth but personal and communal growth. That being said, it is vital to consider what type of community is appropriate for the music classroom, if it is going to promote justice-oriented citizenship. In one light, making music is just as much about musical engagement as it is citizenship. Let us connect it back to the justice-oriented citizen where the educational emphasis is to incorporate collective work that is related to the issues of the community (Woodford, 2019). What is the context of community in this sense, and what does community music mean here?

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 in your teaching.

The music classroom ought to be a space to create a culture of community that recognizes all students, regardless of their backgrounds and cultures. Community music is often different than creating community through music. In schools, music educators are able to promote an overarching sense of community through their ensembles, but that does not necessarily make it community music. Music educators must “see to it that

every child... is guaranteed the opportunity of conscientious, exacting musical education under teachers of inspiration and ability” (Schenck, 1923, p. 15). That is what is meant by community music in the classroom: active, meaningful, and engaging music for all.

Having a democratic purpose for music education

By defining the type of democratic citizen and community music educators create in their classrooms, we can begin to unravel what it means 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 Conservative government in place. What Woodford (2005) explains is that having a political philosophy can help secure a place for music education in public schools. One reason for having a democratic purpose for music education is that it has the potential to save music education from becoming extinct. Another reason is that having a democratic purpose creates a place for everyone to feel included, heard, and accepted in the classroom and beyond. Music educators ought to view themselves as “champions of the public good” (Woodford, 2005, p. xi). Educators can help students become democratic, justice-oriented citizens of their community.

Firstly, how are community and democracy related? According to *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (2019), democracy’s purpose is to “develop freely to its fullest capacity in a cooperative community”. Secondly, what exactly does it mean to create a cooperative community? Let us 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. 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 is that, “we, as individuals, would be incomprehensible without the constant exchange with other people” (Martí, 2018, p. 13). We need each other. Our strength lies in our diversity - in one another. To tie this back to the point on connecting cooperative community to democracy, using this concept in music education is important as “music provides one more source for symbolic interaction” (Martí, 2018, p. 15).

Understanding the Implications

On the other hand, social interaction through music may be over romanticized. 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? Baker (2014) questions 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. Another prime example of prioritizing high quality products over high quality experiences can be found in choir ensembles.

According to O’Toole (1993/1994), choral pedagogy and the discourse surrounding it is primarily concerned with the choir sounding “good” and not about its potential for social interaction. Both of these examples beg the question, why are we so

concerned with the product when music making is about collaboration and citizenship? Music making ought to be about creating a culture of community.

Music making, especially in band, orchestra or choral ensembles, can quickly become a space that breeds power. As Small (1998) states, the modern conception of the conductor is someone who “is in charge of every detail of the performance” so that the “players’ autonomy and power of independent action” are abolished (p. 83). The idea of one sole person having all the knowledge ties directly into Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Music educators are given a lot of power and may be unconsciously oppressing their students and silencing them. It is for this reason that language and discourse are so important in the music classroom. Foucault (1979) states that discourse is a conversation with a specific vocabulary that intentionally creates ignorance as well as power. What music educators influence is the discourse or the conversation surrounding musicking. Music educators can create a discourse that inherently gives all of the power to the conductor (O’Toole, 1993/1994). Yet, is that what music educators *ought* to do?

The Power of Power

Perhaps music educators can now see the importance of music in “developing imagination and creativity” or “provoking students to think more carefully and deeply about the state of society” (Woodford, 2019, p. 24). Now, let us turn to the idea of power being a tool or a weapon. The arts are critical tools that help communicate ideas to the public, according to Dewey (1946). So if we want our students to have profound, deep, and critical thoughts about the world and as music educators we do this through the means of making music, then why are we not letting them be part of the music making

experience? From giving them back some power in our choirs and bands to making it about the people and not the product, O'Toole (1993/1994) states that we will be moving towards a twenty-first century music education philosophy. If knowledge is power as Foucault (1979) claims, then providing students with access to this knowledge through musical engagement will give them autonomy so that they can become justice-oriented citizens, as to encourage individual responsibility and creativity.

Music educators must acknowledge 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 high-levels of music. To combat this, it is the role of music educators to carry forward a democratic purpose to make sure that all students are indeed heard. Yet, one final question remains: how do music educators incorporate their democratic purposes into curriculum and lesson plans in order to foster a culture of community? How do they make it about the process and not the product?

Democracy: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

It is very easy to say that educators are going to have a democratic music philosophy, but how exactly will they accomplish this? Woodford (2019) suggests that using improvisation, performance, and most importantly composition all allow students to express themselves and gain a critical awareness of the world around them and the music in it. It gives them a voice. Why would music educators want to incorporate this into their music classrooms in the first place though? What could be the negative implications of having a democratic purpose?

According to Brennan (2016), democracy is not so picturesque as it “turns us into civic enemies who have grounds to hate one another” (p. 7). Quite contrary to what has been previously discussed, democracy justifies the poor decisions of our government because of the right and freedom democracy itself has given them (Brennan, 2016). It is true that democracy, just as any other form of government, requires constant justification (Brennan, 2016). Music educators would not want to incorporate their democratic purposes into the music classroom without having a reason why behind it. Brennan (2016) goes as far as to state that “advocating for democracy fails and corrupts” (p. 55), because we are approaching it too freely. Yet, democracy is not meant to be used as an excuse for unwarranted freedom. Ideally, democracy is meant to give all people a voice and the music class as an occasion for the “development of musical, intellectual, and moral character” (Woodford, 2005, p. 85). What Woodford (2005) suggests is that the “pursuit of a more humane and democratic approach to music teaching and learning (as opposed to vocational training or the pursuit of excellence for its own sake) might be the only intelligent or sane thing for music teachers to do, for anything else might only contribute (as happens all too often) to tyranny, oppression, or indifference” (p. 85).

It’s up to you, Music Educators

In order to advocate for democracy in the right context for the music classroom, educators need to hold themselves accountable to a democratic standard through music-making. They need to advocate for democracy and community in their schools, students, and greater community. Furthermore, music educators ought to let students know that there is more than one definition of democracy and they have the power to choose. Yet,

there is no room for hypocrisy here. As Menand (1997) so eloquently writes, “it isn’t what we teach that instils virtue; it’s how we teach. We are the books our students read most closely. The most important influence in their liberalism is our liberalism” (p. 17-18). Furthermore, Dewey believed the role of educators was not to teach students *what* to think but *how* to think, and that exposing students to controversial ideas could stimulate critical thinking (Woodford, 2019).

In addition, music educators ought to constantly involve democracy in their rehearsals and lesson plans. Why? Because music must be modelled and experienced to be understood (Woodford, 2005). When we combine democracy with virtues such as friendship, mutual respect, honesty and a willingness to sacrifice, music educators can build a sense of community within their music classrooms (Woodford, 2005).

Another solution that McLean (2019) offers is using bands and orchestras as a “space for students’ democratic development” (p. 1). McLean (2019) suggests that while having a democratic purpose for music education may provide “opportunities for the development of ‘social justice’ values and ‘citizenship’” (p. 1), there is also a certain amount of sacrifice required. Allen (2004) goes as far as to argue that sacrifice in our ensembles is in fact necessary for democracy to exist. That is to say that some students, or even teachers, may need to sacrifice their own interpretations of the music for the greater good of the ensemble. McLean (2019) concludes that music educators must be critical of which ideas or whose voices are dominating in their classrooms and ensembles so that they can approach their teaching with a more democratic purpose in mind.

Conclusion

In order for music educators to advocate for a culture of community through democracy in the twenty-first century music classroom, they will first need to define what kind of democracy they are seeking, what kind of citizen they want their students to become, and what kind of a community they will foster. Social democracy and the justice-oriented citizen both allow students to shape their own learning experiences and define their own success. Creating a space where every child is able to come together and create music fosters a positive culture of community. Yet, on the part of the teacher, there has to be some sort of a democratic sacrifice if they are truly going to encompass a culture of community in their music classrooms. Not all voices can be heard all the time as it would “detract from the creative spontaneity at the heart of musical performance” (McLean, 2019, p. 4). Ultimately, educators need to model how to become justice-oriented citizens while also advocating for a greater collective community within their classrooms, requiring a certain amount of sacrifice of interpretation and power.

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