Snapshot Reflections:
Targeting Young Boys Singing Girls’ Songs In School

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Abstract: Phillip Brett and Elizabeth Wood (2006) note that sexuality, like musicality, is embedded in an individual sense of self. What if those unique or complex notions of our evolving self—including social identifiers like gender—fluidly transcend cultural expectations in educational contexts and beyond? In this study, I will share and reflect upon historical shards of my experience becoming a solo singer and musician in middle school. These events took place in a suburb of Detroit, Michigan in the late 1980s during my seventh and eighth grade years. Please join me in this arts-based work, as I revisit two live snapshot recordings of performances from that time, including curated personal artifacts/journals, and other relevant or intersecting works woven within a process that incorporated member checking with my then music teacher and those stakeholders who shared a part of constructing my world.
The veil of modesty torn, the shameful parts shown, I know—\[with my cheeks aflame—\]the need to hide myself or die, but I believe by facing and enduring this painful anxiety I shall, as a result of my shamelessness, come to know a strange beauty (Genet, 1964, p. 163).

**Angle Of View: Discourse, Away From Taboo [In School]**

Leo Bersani (1987) writes that male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sex itself, as the risk of self-dismissal of losing sight of the self, and in doing so, it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* (enjoyment) as a mode of askesis—that practice as severe self-discipline. Ellis Hanson (2009) finds such logic of male homosexuality arbitrary that advertises like a centerfold: it makes everyone’s risk and shame more visible. In Jonathan Ned Katz’s *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (2007) he notes Dr. Charles H. Hughes’ “Erotopathia—Morbid Eroticism” Pan-American Medical Congress speech (September, 1893), claiming that the mind and feelings could be turned back into normal channels by medical treatment: the homo and hetero sexual changed [back] into beings of natural erotic inclination, with normal impulsions. Perhaps such binary ideals have brought about other studies, like that of Jason Cianciotto & Sean Cahill (2006) reflecting upon such etiology spurring ex-gay activism, including similar ideals from the conversion therapist Dr. Joseph Nicolosi, who wrote that homosexuality is a psychological condition that is not a sexual problem, rather a gender identity problem… where anticipatory shame is the foundation.

More background: Phillip Brett and Elizabeth Wood (2006) note that sexuality, like musicality, is embedded in an individual sense of self. Arguing along lines proposed of Foucault, David Halperin (1990) pinpoints historical difficulty: “Homosexuality presupposes sexuality, and sexuality itself… is a modern invention” which “represents the *appropriation* of the human body and its erogenous zones by an ideological discourse” (pp. 24-25). Yet by the end of the century, Brett and Wood (2006) share that the dominant model of heterosexuality was in opposition to an actual (but still incoherent) homosexual identity and that a similar process of identity formation can be seen in music, between musicalness (nature) and musicality (constructed in various music institutions).

The connection between musicality and homosexuality, and a strong supposition that the music profession is made up largely of homosexuals, entered public discourse as an indirect result of sexology, the scientific work fundamental to the modern understanding of sexuality, beginning with K. F. Ulrich’s pioneering work on Uranism in the 1860s and expanded by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Magnus Hirschfeld, Albert Moll, and other German authorities. Havelock Ellis (1915) referred to Oppenheim noting that the musical disposition is marked by a great emotional instability, and this instability is a disposition to nervousness where the musician has not been rendered nervous by his music, but he owes his nervousness (as also, it may be added, his disposition to homosexuality) to the same disposition to which he owes his musical aptitude (Brett & Wood, 2006 p. 352; Ellis, 1915).

Such beliefs, when juxtaposed with the trials and conviction of Oscar Wilde in 1895 (under the famous Labuchère amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885), aggravated the climate for homosexuals, as neither the presence of homosexuals in music nor their contributions to it could be acknowledged and the experience of social oppression that informs such lives could not be connected to musicality (Cook, 2005).

Phillip Brett and Elizabeth Wood (2006) also note that the art of music, the music profession, and musicology in the twentieth century have all been shaped by the knowledge and fear of homosexuality, for any talk or forbidden and illegal sexuality and music was proscribed. They make the case that the need to separate music from homosexuality has driven the crucial belief that music transcends ordinary life and is autonomous of social effects or expression, and that most homosexuals internalize their oppressions. It has also contributed to the resistance toward critical inquiry into politics—especially the sexual politics—
of music, and into issues related to sexual diversity such as gender, class, ethnicity and race, religious belief, and power.

However, Steven Seidman (2010) rallies us to think of sex as deeply social, approaching sex as a social construction (Seidman, 1995), where discussions of sexual morality from products of social factors (e.g., economics, gender, public discourses, media images, family, and science) come into a more reasoned tone, free from absolute authority (nature or God). He notes that few have frank, informative discussions about sex with kin, teachers, or peers; indeed, many lack the kinds of information about the body and sexual technique that would allow us to become skilled, effective sexual agents. Is it any wonder that many of us find it awkward or are simply incapable of talking about our sexual preferences and concerns in thoughtful ways? He concludes that we must consider available research, people’s actual experiences, and the likely personal and social consequences of varied forms of sexual control.

Bearing identity in relation to ego, we may think about this broadly to mean who we were and, Sharon Gewirtz and Alan Cribbs (2009) suggest, who we think we are and who we want to be. Manuel Castells (2004) further distinguishes between roles and identities, where identities are sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through a process of individuation; [Roles] become identities only when and if social actors internalize them, and construct meaning around this internalization. This, along with David Hargreaves, Dorothy Miell and Raymond MacDonald (2002) noting that we use music not only to regulate our own everyday moods and behaviors, but also to present ourselves to others in the way we prefer. However, Sharon Gewirtz and Alan Cribbs (2009) remind us that this does not mean we must critically adopt the subject positions that are made available to us by dominant discourses. Still, the inability to pass or adopt such expectations from the metanarrative (Lyotard, 1984) makes one a target and is something to seriously reflect upon within any community of practice (Wenger, 1998) mindfully subjugating learner ego. In addition, Brunner (1990) reminds us that Selves are not isolated nuclei of consciousness locked in the head, but are “distributed” interpersonally. He continues, nor do Selves arise rootlessly in response to the present; they take meaning as well from historical circumstances that gave shape to the culture of which they are an expression.

Clearly, space could be made for all human beings, where any person may be empowered to construct what is meaningful, including other intersections of sexual orientation, gender schemas (Bem, 1981), or those influencers of identity without negative consequences. Tia DeNora (2000) writes that the heart of the matter, from how individuals not only experience culture, but also how they mobilize culture for being, doing, and feeling. Raymond MacDonald, Dorothy Miell and Graeme B. Wilson (2005) bring further light on views of talk as a means through which people establish their identities (and through talk about music, to establish their musical identities), allowing an interesting insight into the function of this form of music communication. Simon Frith (1996) notes that what makes music special for identity via a spatial metaphor, is that it defines a space without boundaries. Music is thus the cultural form best able both to cross borders and to define places. Jackie Wiggins (2011) shares:

Especially if there are circumstances embedded in music learning that can cause participants to feel vulnerable, we must assure that music learning environments nurture and support learners’ sense of purpose, optimism, autonomy, confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, skill, and know-how. To be effective, music learning environments must nurture and support learner agency (p. 19).

Aperture: Making My Experience Visible [For All Learners And The Profession]

Yet, in my school experience, learner agency was rarely nurtured or supported. For example, male students who chose to sing in school were often disenfranchised. Peers, parents, and teachers often taunted them, calling them “gay,” isolating them or breaking healthy/humane boundaries within educational institutions and beyond. Yet, what if singing is the heart and soul of one’s life such that it is the most important part of one’s school day? What if one also happens to be or is evolving into an effeminate gay male? Then what?
I often found myself inspired to write upwards of memories, photographs, or other artful artifacts (Manovski, 2012) that fluidly compose a kind of collage from/of my life. In turn, I found myself expressing what I had come to know artfully—that my art was an active participant in my life—positively nurturing my agency that was a part of enabling me to take responsibility for my own healing/learning. Sharing my embodied knowing (Bresler, 2004) of a time from processes of identity construction taking place within networks of power and differential access to economic, social, and cultural resources was also framed by my studies including, but not limited to, narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), autoethnography (e.g. Ellis, 2004), arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012), social justice (Greene, 1995), and social constructivism in music education contexts (Wiggins, 2009).

Readers of this article will hopefully be asking themselves new questions along with other scholars and experts, including characters reconstructed from my lived life, wondering what it might mean for their own theory and pedagogy, so we all may become educational stakeholders dedicated to the endurance of the cognitive, the ethical, the aesthetic, and the useful, within lives that stretch out far [after] graduation day (Barone, 2001). This, along with my efforts to work through and away from negatively marginalized experiences that would continue to wound, to violently gag, to bind, to bury me into blinding silence, pressed by shoes heavily soaked with poisons of shame were I not unyielding.

**Latent Image: Can You Reach My Friend?**

I remember telling my choir teacher that I would love to sing a solo at the next middle school choir concert during my seventh grade year. I actually was surprised at how clearly I was able to articulate this and could see my teacher processing what I had come to share in a manic, fast, quick-tongued and excited sentence. She just sort-of blinked and nodded, sending me back to my seat. Soon thereafter, I remember her asking to speak with me (sealing it with a wink). Whatever doubt I carried seemed to lift away and I was excited, once again.

I’m not sure if it was before school, during lunch or after school, but I do remember that we were finally alone together. I remember the sheer joy of wondering what song she had found for me to sing, like I was going to be a part of knowing this really big secret. It was like anticipating the best present, e-v-e-r. My teacher then said, “I found this awesome song that I think you should consider singing for our next choir concert. I would like to know what you think of it. I think it would be a great fit for your voice and I think the song has a really good message for all of the students at our school. If you don’t like it though—don’t worry—we’ll find something else that will be just as good or better.” She handed me the cassette tape—which seemed to be happening in slow motion—and I remember seeing the color blue on the case, along with the title “Can You Reach My Friend?” written by Billy Sprague and Jim Weber.

I had never heard of this song before and I thought the woman singing was wonderful. I then became ecstatic when I realized that the accompaniment tracks on the other side of the tape (without the singer) sounded exactly like her accompaniment. During this time in my life, it was very difficult for me to find authentic accompaniments of songs I liked: this was an appreciated bonus. I wondered how I could make myself sound just like the singer on the recording—I wanted to be as good as the person singing on the tape. I would not tire of the two-part acoustic guitar beginning, sidled with a simple verse that flowed effortlessly to the refrain that would flower in texture, and would “bring his searching to an end,” over, and over, again.

However, though I would come to understand more about what the song was really about in time, the music seemed very meaningful to me for other reasons, too. It wasn’t like any of the other songs on the radio that I knew. It seemed to be about something really important. I also l-o-v-e-d that the music was for “high voice.” I began a process that included listening and re-listening, singing and re-singing, and imitating the woman on the cassette tape recording as best I could; I was trying to match the other singer’s voice on the tape and I was trying to make my voice sound just as authentic, somehow. I thought, “Wow, I think the audience (my imagined audience) would love the message in this song,” just like my music teacher said.

Later, I came to realize that there was nothing like having a chance to sing this song on stage. No matter how hard I tried to pretend that my bedroom was our middle school stage, nothing came close to my
imagination as actually being on our stage at school. Something magical seemed to happen when the house lights were turned down and when my voice was amplified with an accompaniment that hugged me. The feeling was different, the place was different, it smelled different… everything was different. I remember the intimate relationship I wove with the microphone, the appreciation I developed for the floor monitors, and I also remember the haloes I saw from the refracting lenses of my glasses: I was simply transported into another world between the sounds, the smells, the lighting… pretending to sing to God in context of the piece.

I also knew that, at home, I could always redo any part as many times as I liked until I was satisfied. However, at school, there was never enough time, and music class felt like a rare occasion that only happened once a week (my free pass from the drudgery of the rest of my school day). Still, I am forever grateful for those fleeting moments, because I loved music and my music teacher. She would always compliment me and help me figure out tricky parts. She would always try to find time for us to rehearse before school or after school, even though we both wished we could just rehearse during school. Overall, she wanted me to be the best I could be, while telling/showing me that she would be right there, supporting and cheering me on no matter what, which was unusual considering the rest of my experience.

When it came time for our dress rehearsal, I realized that I would have to sing this piece in front of the class. Even though this is something very logical—this was not my first dress rehearsal with this group—it was the first realization of my new role in a familiar context as a solo singer. In my mind at the time, singing for an audience was very different (and easier) than singing a solo in front of my classmates. Right away, before the music even started, I could hear everyone snickering. Did I make this up? Was it all in my head? I don’t think so—my throat was tightening. I heard some girls say, “He’s so fat.” My breathing became very shallow and high—I heard another set of boys say, “Don’t screw-up, faggot; fuckin’ four-eyes.” I just kept walking to my place through the whispered taunts and sporadic giggles on stage. I tried to just ignore them, like the principal, the assistant principal, the guidance counselor, my other teachers, and mom said. I looked at my music teacher—she nodded, I nodded—and then she hit the play button. I tried to make it happen and it was over before I knew it.

Did I sound good? Did I remember all of the words? Did I screw up anywhere? How did I sound? Then, my eyes met with my teacher’s eyes and when I saw the glow from her smile, I knew I must have done something OK. I finally smiled (relieved). When I went back to my place on the risers, I didn’t hear anybody say anything this time, though there were still some whispers I couldn’t make out. I also didn’t have to squeeze my way back on the risers either. It seemed like people were actually making room for me to get back on, which was actually really weird.

On the afternoon of the performance for the entire school, I remember panicking about how I looked. I thought I looked horrible and I couldn’t get my hair to look as nicely as I wanted it to. I had a love/hate relationship with my glasses and that day was a hate day. I was also too fat for the shirt I was going to wear, and afraid that I would sweat right through it anyway, so I stole an oversized green sweater from my father’s wardrobe, putting on my favorite watch, too. Again, as if life was on fast forward, there I was in front of everyone in the school.

When the music began, I couldn’t hear it on the monitors in front of me, so I gave my teacher the signal she taught me to give her if that happened. Thank goodness, she fixed the problem right away. I then was able to transport myself into the piece and again, just went for it and made it happen. I worked to make it seem like this was the first time I was singing this song; I worked to make it seem like this was a real friend of mine that I was singing about; I worked to make it seem like this song really wasn’t about me, hiding the fact that I wished I had a friend who was singing this song for me.

Negative Bullying And Marginalization [In School]: Targeting Musicians Performing Beyond Expected [Gender] Roles

If I was ever bullied in school—in my life—it was exacerbated within the role of singer from within my developing performance identity (part of my musical identity). Alike Patricia Campbell, Claire Connell and Amy Beegle (2007), music is a prominent force in the lives of adolescents (for me—so far—it has been a prominent force in my entire life), and they value its potency in directing the course of their daily
activity as well as their long-range hopes and dreams. Still, I heard negative words then more clearly than I do now (people were less guarded, didn’t care if I knew what they thought, and didn’t value what I valued): “Did you see the way he was moving?” “He’s such a girl!” “What a total fag!” “What’s he wearing?” “Did you see the makeup on him?” “What did he do with his hair?” “Is he gay?!” “Why is his voice so high?” “Oh my god, we should call him Hollywood!”

The multitude of slurs would also encourage others to push me into lockers, knocking my books out of my hands, threatening me, “I’m gonna beat your ass, faggot!”

I was spit on and often used as target practice, dodging spitballs, gum, or other objects. In time, everything seemed to escalate and they did beat my ass, often. In addition, I had somehow inspired others to improvise humiliating impersonations of my singing: people would imitate me, and overtly gesticulate and brashly croon, bastardizing the music and way of being I found meaningful. I was bullied everyday and in time, I realized that many adults knew about what was going on, too. In fact, I would come to learn that many adults supported such unhealthy taunts endured, “Well, he shouldn’t act like such a girl! He’s too effeminate! He should learn to take a joke like a man.” I wonder how Colin Durrant’s (2001) reflection on how music operates in the world would positively support the musical development of the individual and the socio-cultural context of adolescents in this context. Perhaps we should take more time to unearth what Nicola Dibben (2002) refers to as gender typing, how it constrains the opportunities and engagements with music which are possible for an individual at any particular time.

**Homophobia And Music Education**

Branching from the camps of Nicola Dibben (2002), Kevin Jennings (2005), Kevin Kumashiro (2009), and Catherine A. Lugg (1998, 1999, 2003), Louis Bergonzi’s (2009) article “Sexual Orientation and Music Education: Continuing a Tradition” and reader’s comments concerning Bergonzi’s article (Readers Comments, 2010) bridge the way for us to consider -- isn’t it time for us to acknowledge the ways we reinforce heterosexuality and the heterosexual lifestyle, and to examine how homophobia biases our curricular content and the lives and work of LGBT music teachers? For me, I would broaden that question to the lives and work of anyone living within such unnecessary battles within music education and beyond, where the bully could be mindfully, compassionately disarmed and undergo a transformation toward cultivating specific kinds of relationships which may head off bullying before it develops.

However, if establishing a heterosexual identity has relied heavily on publicly stigmatizing homosexuality, as Steven Seidman suggests (2010), how is a public straight identity staked out when homosexuality is considered a natural and normal part of the human condition? Especially regarding music education, how do we move toward healthy processes that value all participants—reaffirming human rights—away from certainty or rigid expectations/expressions that intersect with gender, sex, or other social identifiers? How may we be free from stunting our opportunities for deeper ways of understanding, constructing meaningful connections through compassion and empathy? Akin to Phillip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary Thomas (2006):

The *treat* that “queering” represents may be to uncover for music’s lovers what it is we generally repress in thinking about our experience of music: our emotional attachments to music, our needs met by music, our accommodations to society through music, our voices, our bodies (p. xi).

Still, an example of the immense work ahead of us may also be gleaned from readers reactionary comments to Louis Bergonzi’s (2009) article showcasing polarized voices from praise to responses like:

“I completely disagree with this article on an ethical and moral standpoint, I’m also disappointed in the writing of the article” (p. 6),

“To suggest even the slightest modification of teaching/learning objectives to satisfy the political correctness disease that is running rampant in our country is pure folly” (p. 7),

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and “how vulgar to include the homosexual agenda boldface in a publication such as MEJ” (p. 6).

Again, what if you had a gay male student in your classroom wanting to sing songs sung by other girls and could actually sing them? What if he wanted to sing alto or soprano? What if you had a girl who wanted to sing tenor or bass and could? What if they auditioned for the school musical, desiring to perform roles contrary to your expectations? Would you disallow these learners the opportunity for a positive experience? Would you want to shield them from any oppression that could soon take place? More important, what do you think should happen when verbal and physical harm comes to a student for singing songs like “Can You Reach My Friend?” What would you do if you or others in power had trouble condoning liberty and justice for all?

Lens Aberration: The Wind Beneath My Wings

So many people were overtly harassing me, it was overwhelming. Not a day went by that didn’t include an emotional or physical jab from the time I stepped onto the bus to school, to the moment I stepped off. Sadly, I didn’t realize then that I was actually bullied at home, as well and forced to endure my daily hell. However, all I knew, all I can remember in detail, was that I wanted to sing. Unfortunately, my wanting to sing was overshadowed by my wishing I was never born: I wanted to die. I hated myself—it seemed to me that everyone else hated me, too—what I was and I couldn’t find a way to change or pass. All of a sudden, there came a point in my life when I told myself that I just couldn’t handle it anymore. So, I slit my wrists that year, thinking about all of the pain that started before kindergarten. I remember everyone yelling at me about the choice I made. Things at school became worse and the girls became more aggressive as they harassed me. At the time, it seemed like the only thing keeping me trudging on was the fact that I somehow won a scholarship to go to the Interlochen All-State Summer Camp for young musicians. I also got to sing another solo for our next concert and 11-o-v-e-d Bette Midler.

The preparation for this experience was different, though. My music teacher said that I should think about wearing a tuxedo. Actually, she said that since I was doing a little breakout dance solo with a partner (a popular girl) in the song that was before my solo, we both should dress-up for the part. She also asked if I could sing without my glasses, so they wouldn’t get in the way of my dancing, and that my hair should be cut and styled more natural.

A tuxedo? I’ve only worn one of those to a wedding. Without my glasses… didn’t she know how blind I was? Wear my hair naturally—without gel, hair spray, and my signature flare—was she out of her mind?! And she wanted me to sing after our big dance number? I wondered if I’d have enough time to catch my breath before my solo. Still, I did whatever she told me and just nodded my head. I trusted her—well, she was the only one that was nice to me—and I knew that she was trying to help me in some way.

I still remember the feeling of those weird, hard, unyielding tuxedo shoes that clicked and slipped on the floor of the stage. I remember the feeling of the tuxedo that seemed to bind me like a kind of straightjacket, while the shirt and top button seemed to be strangulating me toward ruin and humiliation. I remember huffing and puffing—truly—I was a straight man and not a woman in a tuxedo. I knew I could sing without my glasses, so they wouldn’t get in the way of my dancing, and that my hair should be cut and styled more natural.

My teacher was so very happy with me and I had no idea what I had done differently. She would play the video recording of me singing this song over and over again during conferences or just in class. She played it so often that the tape itself seemed to look all deteriorated from being overplayed. It exemplified something really special to her. One day, I asked her if she could play the video when I sang “Can You Reach My Friend?” She said, “Oh, no, no—honey, you sound and look much better in this song.” I knew something more was going on and I couldn’t put my finger on it then. I’m not sure if I can now. I asked her for a copy of those recordings, keeping in touch for many years. She finally gave me a copy when I was 36 years old; I never gave up asking.
Toning: Allowing Our Voices To Be Our Guide [In The School Experience And Beyond]

Very similarly, like in the work of Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and the Mind by Mary Belenky, Blyth Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule (1997), my experience in family and school life consisted of violence instead of dialogue, one-way talk, inequality, and my rebellion toward releasing myself from negative cycles by freely questioning those in authority. Much was imposed upon me, my being silenced, and I somehow came to use music in a way that helped heal the split between my intellect and emotion (Manovski, 2012). Phillip Brett and Elizabeth Wood (2006) note:

Such tensions of the human spirit brought about by the forces of oppression and the counterforces it also generates are much in need of deciphering in order to make greater sense of social and musical experience. By focusing on such matters, a gay and lesbian perspective has the means to expand the entire critical and historical enterprise (p. 378).

Michelangelo Signorile (2003) also reminds us that heterosexuals may not realize that they routinely discuss aspects of their own sexuality every day, that some thought I suffered some kind of prolonged psychological trauma [unrelated to their oppression], and writes to give courage to millions of gay people who stay in the closet out of fear and shame, as they are not as alone as homophobic [U.S.] America would have them believe. And, somewhere in-between my later educational journey, I began to realize that I am worthy of belonging and love. I do matter. I do not exclusively attribute this to my deeper understanding of sexual orientation, my gender, or other identity, rather to the opportunity and permission of reflecting upon those emergent themes in context of the qualitative whole that honors those taken-for-granted intersections critically. In addition—if you are willing, dear reader—you will also be a part of contributing potential findings, creating fresh questions, exploring the parameters and possibilities, away from certitudes in the dialogue we may embark. Then, should we find ourselves nose-to-nose with other antagonists opposed to empathetic ways of being and learning, perhaps we shall not be as alone or isolated as we may have once been. It could even be that we could make room for mutual dialogue including allies and our oppressors, hopefully further away from what Louis Bergonzi experienced (Readers Comments, 2010):

It was a bit disheartening that many, when asked, were not willing to place their ideas into the public arena and let them be considered for publication in this column. I say this because, in my experience, the most undesirable result of the looking at a contentious issue is a closing off of dialogue (p. 11).

Conversations that are intentionally limited to a “gotcha” or a “slam dunk” are too common in our society. Civil discourse is often shut down; viewpoints don’t get exchanged, reconsidered, reaffirmed, or revised (p. 8).

Being and becoming a musician was not a ploy for my coming out, a way to argue or disgruntle, rather seemed to be the most natural way for me to participate, process, and become more aware of myself and the world I lived in. It was my lifeline.

I always knew that I wanted to sing and though I certainly was more inclined to sing girls’ songs, I more so craved that natural high from literally singing or performing: being a part of the music. During that short time, I was released from that negative grip, that numbing suffocation that seemed to obliterate my weird, moody, awkward, four-eyed, fat (or whatever negative label), feeling, or emotion I was experiencing. I became a part of something important, maybe even something spiritual. It was a hopeful opportunity and process, where I was able to momentarily escape the harassment I alone had to deal with from others’ conscious or unconscious intentions.

My artful moments were special and imperfect times of refuge; they were special and imperfect instances provided by music teachers or others in power that valued me wherever I was in my cognitive evolution. These people offered me the right to be my fluid self without negative consequences through music and the arts, empowering me to make more and more meaningful connections through such mediums. They furnished me a safe and healthy space where I could healthfully bridge gaps in my thinking. Soon, I
was able to penetrate negative barriers and found myself patiently learning to enjoy the processes a part of my learning, regardless of those misconceptions still invisible to me or seemingly impossible to solve, because it was more important to feed that will within me to continue learning within a collaborative, caring approach designed for my multiple ways of being and understanding.

In time I would also come to appreciate and healthfully use my evolving, real voice. Feeling it, allowing it to be my guide, free from pushing or making things happen would all become part of my un-hurting process, too. I was able to release the pain and worthlessness that deeply welled with shame, as I was empowered to construct my own understanding through meaningful study, including the courage to demand healthy boundaries with whomever I studied with. Soon, I would become responsible for my own rescue. However, these experiences rarely ever occurred during my educational experience prior to my doctoral studies. Or did they?

**Zoom Lens: Arts-Based Research And The Enlargement Of Mind**

From music education to vocal pedagogy and further on, I have sought out opportunities that could revive and positively enable the best parts of myself to flourish (Manovski, 2012). In turn, this article is an invitation for you to be a part of that quest, to enter a conspiracy with this [writer] and those characters herein, a political and value-based conversation about the relationship between current conditions and a more desirable state of affairs (Barone, 2001). I do this because I have often worked with learners who have been confronted with terrible obstacles by those who actively worked to navigate them away from their own desired/fluid identities, roles, or self; I do this because I have often worked with learners who have difficulty experiencing healthy and safe spaces during their evolution within school cultures; I do this because I have often worked with learners who could benefit from our dialogue, our new questions, that examine how we may foster increasing compassion and empathy past poster boards and slogans. How may we move toward accepting, embracing, and valuing each other in authentic, genuine, and meaningful ways, honoring all of our ways of being—ways of expression—free from causing anyone verbal or physical harm in school? How may we learn to really listen to each other?

The verisimilitude of social progress in educational settings still remind me of my own negative prior experience, inviting me to be more critically aware of present conditions in our school culture(s), which evokes or triggers my own unfinished stories from memories I aspire to more deeply understand: those moments that include what was, instead of what should have been (Barone, 2001). Conceivably, this process may also help us to be ethically responsive to what is, while visibly reestablishing and making palpable those resonant principals of equity, freedom, liberty, and social justice for all.

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