Abstract: There is little qualitative research regarding the preparation of music educators to teach in culturally diverse or different settings. Existing literature suggests that there are issues surrounding personal vs. professional identity within the field that may have an effect on the music educator’s view regarding issues of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexuality within the classroom and curriculum. This article is an exploration of the above statements utilizing data from a semester-long study with senior music education majors (participant observation and interviews). Analysis centers on what Spradley (1980) describes as fundamental aspects of ethnographic study: cultural artifacts, cultural behavior, and cultural knowledge. Areas of particular interest include: identity tools that these pre-service teachers bring to the profession, how they conceive of personal/professional identity, and where the limits might exist for their capacity for teaching in culturally diverse or culturally different settings. Findings include a discussion of the role of critique in the field of music education.
Social Justice Education (SJE) is a specific orientation that calls for educators to examine hegemonic power structures and create space for critique of those structures within the classroom. As Lee Anne Bell (1997) stated, “the goal of social justice education is both a process and a goal...The process for attaining the goal of social justice should [be] democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change” (pp. 3-4). A major tenet of a social justice orientation to education is the implication of the educator in the very same hegemonic structure they wish to critique. Thus, the personal identity of the educator is always implicated in professional identity. Any effort to maintain personal identity as outside the realm of teaching, then, is an effort to preserve the myth of schooling and teaching as neutral and non-political. Research in the field of music teacher education has tended to focus on the occupational “socialization” of music teachers into the profession (Campbell, Thompson, & Barrett, 2010; Isbell, 2008).

Mark Campbell et al (2010) refer to socialization as the “ongoing assimilation and integration of life experiences whereby an individual adopts the norms, values, and shared beliefs of a particular group in order to function within the specific environment or culture” (p. 9). Based on the sheer volume of published research on the professional or occupational socialization of music educators, there is evidence that music education may promote a distinct separation of several dimensions of identity including personal and professional (Campbell, Thompson, and Barrett, 2010; Dolloff, 1999; Isbell, 2008; Woodford, 2002).

Utilizing qualitative data from a semester-long study of pre-service music educators, this article will explore how this strict delineation between personal and professional identities may have an effect on the music educator’s views regarding issues of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexuality within the classroom and curriculum. First, I will provide a review of available literature regarding the identity and socialization of pre-service music educators. Then I will provide a discussion of participants’ conceptions of personal and professional identity. Also of interest are the identity tools that pre-service teachers bring to the profession so that they may signal belonging in the field. Data collected for this study suggests that some students may seek to deny personal identity to claim belonging, or conversely, assert their personal identities in ways that seek to explicitly integrate personal with professional identity. Implicit to this analysis is a discussion of where limits might exist for music education in culturally diverse or culturally different settings. Following this analysis, I will detail my thoughts regarding implications of this data for the field of music education.

I live and write as a White heterosexual American woman, who was raised in a working class town on the U.S./Canadian Border. After graduating from high school, I attended a predominately white institution (PWI) where I was not challenged to interrogate my white racial identity and the privilege that I experienced because of it. It was not until my first music teaching placement that a student challenged me to consider the role of my personal identity in the context of the classroom power structure. Her statement, “Chorus is a white class,” critiqued the harsh emphasis I placed on classroom order. She also stated that choir at my school had traditionally been perceived as a “white class” based on the type of music programmed, and it didn’t seem like I was doing anything to meet the needs of students of color. An intense focus on appearing competent and professional had outweighed my values and commitments to socially just teaching practices, pushing aside my personal identity. My reaction to this humbling exchange was the first of many periods of critical reflection about my practice and my training. Through my students’ reaction and blunt feedback, I began to see that a focus on multiculturalism was not the same as being a critical, culturally relevant educator.

Moving forward with this study, and my career in academia, I realize that I am working both within and against the system. As a researcher, I occupy a position of power much like that of a teacher in the front of a classroom. Teachers and researchers have traditionally been afforded the power to make judgments about ability and saliency, and to delineate between good and bad. I acknowledge this contradiction, as well as my own tensions, fears, and struggle as I seek to explore conceptions of social justice, power, and privilege in music classrooms. Most importantly, I recognize my complicity in harmful practices that have abused the power of my
position, even as I seek practices that encourage, engage, and lift up.

**Conceptualizing Identity In Music Education**

In education literature and research, there are varying definitions of identity. Speaking specifically from the field of music education, Paul Woodford (2002) defined identity as “an imaginative view or role that individuals project for themselves in particular social positions, occupations, or situations” (p. 675). Most of the current scholarship in music education suggests that identity is socially constructed. Also implicit in this definition is that projected identities must be hailed or recognized by others in the world. As James Gee (2000) stated,

One cannot have an identity of any sort without some interpretive system underwriting the recognition of that identity. The interpretive system may be people’s historically and culturally different views of nature; it may be the norms, traditions, and rules of institutions; it may be the discourse and dialogue of others; or it may be the workings of affinity groups. (p.108)

Here, James Gee details four ways to view identity, based on the assumption that identities are not free from the grip of historical, institutional, and sociocultural powers or forces. These views include: nature-identity, institution-identity, discourse-identity, and affinity-identity. Each of these four views is salient in a discussion concerning personal and professional identity in music education, in that power is highlighted rather than obscured. For example, in explaining institutional-identity James Gee (2000) contended, “institutional realities create positions from which certain people are expected and sometimes forced to act” (p. 108). Though he insisted that an individual might resist this institutional expectation, they could also be recognized and addressed as the identity they resist nonetheless.

Also concerned with the turn from modernism, James Gee (2000) described how discourse-identities might function in a postmodern sense and how emphasis has been moved “from individuals and the identities that seem to be a part of their ‘individuality’ to the discursive, representational, and semiotic processes through which identities are created, sustained, and contested” (pg. 114). Thus, in a ‘modern’ society, identity is situated in individuals who earn or merit their standing through agentic performance and discourse. Referring to the work of Lev Vygotsky and Mikhail Bakhtin, James Gee explained the postmodern critique of identity, “people’s individual minds are formed out of… social interactions in which they engaged as they acquired their “native” language or later academic languages in school” (p. 114). Furthermore, any small pieces of language or discourse that are heard, uttered, or observed are “recirculated” to create the discourse that builds individual identity – situating identity, again, as a social construct.

A critique of modernism is also reflected in a shift in music education philosophy occurring in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. This shift opened the door for the study of music educator identity as a social construct. At that time, a contingent of music education scholars published works that encouraged a re-thinking of the aims of music education (Alperson, 1994; Bowman, 1994; Elliot, 1995; Jorgensen, 2002, 2003; Regelski, 1998). Each noted that advances in technology, as well as shifting demographics of American public school students led them to question the relevancy of current music education practices. These traditional aims were largely based on aesthetic philosophy that dealt with developing responsiveness to music (Reimer, 1989). Wayne Bowman (1994) agreed that responsiveness should be a core aim of music education, but he also warned that this might lead to deterministic value judgments about musical styles and traditions that deny personal preference and other musical cultures. Western classical music has generally been given privileged status in the field, and even today many music educators aim to pass on the associated tenets and practices. This has had the effect of devaluing musical styles and cultures that fall outside the Western tradition and, in turn, denying validity of personal identities that rely on and celebrate these “othered” traditions.

David Elliot (1995) proposed a “praxial” philosophy of music education that focused on the practice of music making, or *musicking*, a conception of music as a verb rather than a noun. Using this language shift, Elliot sought to denote a distinct focus on music as action and practice. He stated that music is
an inherently social action that has the potential to “preserve a sense of community and self-identity within social groups” (pg. 296). Another aim of this approach, as outlined by Philip Alperson (1994) is to give value and meaning to all musical cultures within the practice of music education. Alperson (1994) stated:

The praxial view of art resists the suggestion that art can be best understood on the basis of some universal or absolute feature or set of features such as aesthetic formalism, whether of the strict or enhanced [expressionist] variety. The attempt is made, rather, to understand art in terms of the variety of meaning and values evidenced in actual practice in particular cultures (p. 233-234).

In other words, under the praxial philosophy of music education, students are encouraged to construct the own meaning and value for a given musical experience. In practice, this particular standpoint would provide a space for the inclusion of personal identity in the field of music education.

Personal And Professional Identities In Music Education Scholarship

There is significant research in music education regarding the occupational or professional identity development of music teachers (Bernard, 2005; Doloff, 1999, 2007; Isbell, 2008; Woodford, 2002). Much of this research has framed occupational identity development in terms of socialization, which Daniel Isbell (2008) described as “the process by which a person learns to adopt, develop, and display actions and role behaviors typical of, and unique to a profession” (p. 163). Socialization consists of both primary socialization and secondary socialization. During primary socialization, individuals observe their surroundings and significant others within those contexts. Additionally, they observe the actions, attitudes, performances, and discourses related to particular roles and identities. Secondary socialization refers to the acquisition of “behaviors and vocabularies” that are particular to a professional field, and usually occurs as part of apprenticeship/trade training, or college degree programs. Daniel Isbell (2008) stated that the purpose of secondary socialization is “to transform lay conceptions into professional conceptions” (p. 163). In a quantitative study designed to investigate the socialization and occupational identity of music educators, Daniel Isbell’s findings suggested, “experiences from primary socialization account for a marginal amount of variance with respect to [occupational] identity” (2008, p. 176). Furthermore, Daniel Isbell found that “experiences associated with secondary socialization in particular are a consistently significant predictor of occupational identity” (p. 176).

From a critical perspective, there are several assumptions to be questioned in Daniel Isbell’s (2008) study of occupational identity in pre-service music educators. First, the study relied on the assumption that most music majors have significant primary socialization experiences in traditional school music settings and come from musical homes (Isbell, 2008; Woodford, 2002). Additionally, Daniel Isbell cited research stating that many individuals who choose to major in music education make that decision in high school. Based on these assumptions, which imply relatively similar primary socialization experiences, it makes sense that there is little variance in occupational identity based on primary socialization. As will be explained in further detail below, two of the interview participants for this study, Aaron and Tasha, described their early experiences with music as outside the conventional primary socialization experiences that Daniel Isbell detailed. For students who come from musical homes and have significant early experience in school music, personal identity –upon entering university music study – may be in high agreement with the desired occupational identity. For students like Aaron and Tasha, however, alternate paths of primary socialization could signal greater dissonance between personal and professional/occupational identity during university experiences.

Julia Koza (2008) drew from personal observations working within a university music education program to theorize about a potential career tracking system that exists in the field of music education that privileges and commodifies certain identities – namely middle class white identities. In other words, those who are granted access to the field of university music education may gain this very

1 All names are pseudonyms.
access due to gatekeeping technologies that place high value on specific common experiences during primary socialization. She posited that the process of music admissions, which relies heavily on private study as a form of primary socialization, as well as distinct and exclusive audition repertoire requirements, represents a “construction of musical difference” that disadvantages students who cannot afford prior study. Furthermore, students who study musical styles outside of the Western classical tradition may also find themselves excluded from university music programs. Undergraduate audition requirements for music education programs state clearly that students must be proficient in the classical tradition, sometimes bluntly stating that other musical styles such as jazz, country, pop, or musical theater are unacceptable. Julia Koza stated that these requirements, together, represent a social funding of race in the field of music education that materializes whiteness. This is of particular interest in considering how limited entry to the field may serve to exclude students who bring non-dominant primary socialization experiences to music education.

Several music education researchers have attempted to address the glaring absence of personal identity in consideration of music teacher preparation (Bernard, 2005; Campbell, Thompson, & Barrett, 2010; Dolloff, 1999, 2007). For each of these scholars, identity takes on a complex and fluid dimension. Rhoda Bernard (2005) positioned identity as “processual, as positions and contexts that constantly shift, and as constructed on multiple levels. The positions and contexts [referred] to include gender, age, class, race, ethnicity, and status” (p. 5). She also includes professional identities in her list of positions, noting that, for her, these include musician, teacher, and researcher. Lori-Anne Dolloff (2007) agrees, “Identity is a complex phenomenon existing not as a unitary subjectivity, but in multiple layers, in webs, or as multi-faceted” (pg. 3). Each of these definitions makes space for personal identity in a conversation of occupational socialization in that each allows for multiple complex and interactive identities. Because complexity is maintained in these conceptions of identity, Rhoda Bernard (2005) and Lori-Anne Dolloff (2007) resist positioning personal and professional as separable. Lori-Anne Dolloff (2007) specifically stated, “developing a personal pedagogy results from the interaction between an individual’s beliefs and skills” (p. 193).

A consideration of personal identity in music teacher education takes into account not only personal narratives aimed specifically at the profession, but also personal conceptions and beliefs about the ways knowledge is produced (Campbell et al., 2010). The purpose of this assertion is not to claim essentialist or static views about the epistemologies based on individuals’ positional identities, but rather to say that interactions with people in specific contexts lead to certain beliefs, assumptions and values. Making sense of the world, through the lens of identity, includes consideration of those positional identities that are projected by the individual, ascribed by institutions, and the ways in which positional identities are accepted, resisted, or fully rejected. Each of these stances toward, or experiences with identity influences the way that we interact with others. As Mark Campbell, Linda Thompson, and Janet Barrett (2010) stated,

A personal orientation to music teaching and learning looks at all participants in the educational process from a dynamic perspective. That is, as we continue to deepen and extend our knowledge of self and others, it is always in the service of more and better teaching. We are not only present oriented; we are also past and future oriented in our thinking about teaching. Most importantly, a personal orientation framework helps us to understand ourselves; it helps us to understand the music experiences we value, the places and situations that support learning and the ways we can help others. (p. 2)

Thus, personal identity examination should not only be a project within music teacher education, but also a political stance. Though Mark Campbell, Linda Thompson, and Janet Barrett (2010) seek to claim a personal orientation to music teacher education as separate from a critical orientation, it is my belief that these two orientations have much in common. To put things another way, I agree with Estelle Jorgensen (2002, 2003) in her contention that music teacher education must aim for a more dialogic or liberating model that acknowledges the learner’s autonomy in construction of knowledge.
Conceptual Framework And Methodology

George Noblit, Susana Flores, and Enrique Murillo (2004) stated, “research methods and theory are all too often taught separately and implicitly portrayed as having different natures” (p.3). In line with these authors, I believe that “methods are ideas and theories in themselves” (Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004, p. 3). This study is approached from the framework of postcritical ethnography, which critiques dominant ideologies and power structures, but also notes that critique is particular to the researcher, as well as socially constructed (Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004). I acknowledge that my voice as a former practitioner of music education is present throughout the design, methodology, and interpretation of data. As noted by George Noblit, Susana Flores, and Enrique Murillo (2004),

Objectivity is usually eschewed in postcritical ethnographies, but is never fully escaped whenever ethnographic interpretations are inscribed. The act of writing inscribes a critical interpretation that exists beyond the intention of the author to de-objectify, dereify, or demystify what is studied. (p. 22)

Context

This study was initially conducted as a requirement for a novice level course on qualitative research, focusing specifically on participant observation and interviewing. Because of my own experience as a university music student and music educator, I felt that my position as researcher might provide a different perspective. For this project, I sought to observe how these pre-service music educators (music education majors) conceived of and enacted the identity and culture of university music education.

Data Collection

Data was collected for this study by way of participant observation and interviews. One class, a senior music education seminar, was the main site and focus for the study. There were thirteen participants in the course (three men and seven women) as well as the course instructor Dr. Hart. The majority of participants were white; only two students – Melina and Tasha – identified as persons of color. I was able to observe this class meeting four times throughout the semester. Additionally, I observed one class meeting of a course for junior music education majors taught by the same professor, and spent several hours in common lobby spaces of the two university music buildings. Jottings were taken in the field, and full field notes written up after each observation, resulting in fifty-two pages of field notes.

Three senior pre-service music educators were interviewed for this study. Aaron, a white man, and Tasha, an African American woman were both suggested to me by the course professor. I approached Hope, a white woman, to request an interview based on her participation in the course meetings that I had observed. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted approximately thirty minutes. Interview prompts were open-ended and inquired about students’ pathway to university music education, their level of comfort in the school of music, as well as their conceptions regarding identity in different spheres of life including family, university, and the school of music. All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed in full.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was initially approached using grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). After an initial round of open coding, I was able to derive several themes for focused coding and theory development. For the purposes of this article, I have centered the discussion specifically on issues of personal vs. professional identity – one of many themes that were apparent from the collected data. In both the classroom observations and interviews, I noted specific strategies and tools used to demonstrate belonging in the professional field of music education. Additionally, I noticed specific instances when students signaled a willingness to include personal identity in the classroom discourse, and others when students sought to create boundaries and keep the two spheres separate.

Participants’ Conceptions Of Personal And Professional Identity

One of the most pressing questions to be asked about the relationship of personal and professional identity involves the level of agreement between one’s existing personal identity and the desired professional
identity. In music education then, how much does a pre-service educator’s personal identity agree with the university vision of music educator identity? In the case of Hope, a white woman, both of her parents are musicians and music educators. She noted that she was “in a music class before [she] could walk.” Thus her personal identity includes rich and long-held conceptions regarding how music educators look, teach, interact, and navigate the world. The classroom, as a setting for musical learning – or even as an occupational backdrop, is not foreign to Hope. In this sense, there is a high level of agreement between Hope’s personal identity, and her projected professional identity. Tasha, an African American woman, also described a rich and vibrant history with music in her personal life.

Both of my parents are singers. My mom and dad both were worship leaders at my church. They weren’t classically trained or anything, but they both have really great voices and that’s where my love of music came from. Just living at home and mom singing, and my dad singing. My family is very musical. If you go to a family reunion, about half of it will be spent with someone at a piano and my whole family singing.

Like Hope, Tasha describes a rich and complex personal musical identity. However, there is little agreement between Tasha’s self-described musical identity and that of university music study. In fact, agreement between personal and professional identity in Tasha’s case was so low at the beginning of her time in the music program, that she described her transition into the major using a metaphor of learning an entirely new culture. She elaborated:

When I first got there, I didn’t know anything about the culture of studying music. It was like a language. It’s like you have to learn a new language. It’s like I was put into a new country, and it was like “Here you go! Figure it out. How are you gonna get your food? How are you gonna find your way around?” It was kind of like that. These music people had this system of communication that I didn’t have. I remember the first couple of days of [music] theory… I wanted to Run. Out. Of. The Room. Everyone was contributing and saying words – I didn’t know what they meant. It was really really intimidating and stressful.

Here, Tasha’s lack of dominant primary socialization experiences left her unequipped to begin university music study on equal footing. She describes the dissonance between her prior experiences with music, and the culture of university music education. Later in the interview, Tasha described how this dissonance would often lead her to “shut off” in classes where she was feeling intimidated. She also noted how she eventually had to learn to assert herself and ask for clarification rather than disengage. While Tasha’s initial inclination was to keep her personal identity as separate and disengaged from her professional music identity, she attributed her success and survival in the program to her assertion of personal identity into the professional field.

Both Aaron and Tasha arrived at college with the intention of pursuing other majors, mathematics and pharmacy respectively, directly contradicting Daniel Isbell’s (2008) assertion that most music majors decide on their career path during high school. A particularly interesting point to note in Tasha’s quote above is her use of the term “music people” to describe native residents of the professional world of music education. Aaron also distinguished himself from those students, whose personal identity is in high agreement with professional identity, using the terms “symphony kids” and “opera kids.” In each case, Aaron and Tasha located themselves as “othered” or outside of these categories. Additionally, both participants voiced strong convictions about the location of certain qualities and concepts as either inside or outside the professional sphere of music education. For Aaron, “fun,” “enjoyment,” and “relaxation” were described as located in popular music culture, not professional university music study. When connected to classroom engagement, positioning enjoyment as outside of school music study has serious implications for teacher training. In Tasha’s case, she described the terms “diversity” and “multicultural” as terms that are only used in dominant whitestream professional settings, and denied that either of these educational attempts at cultural relevancy connect significantly to her lived experience.
In the face of the above distinctions, both Aaron and Tasha attributed their success in the professional field to significant mentors who provided a bridge allowing assertion of personal identity into the professional field. Aaron described Dr. Hart as this bridging mentor, stating that he saw in his playful and comedic classroom presentation, an invitation to enact his self-described “goofball” personality. Tasha credited her voice instructor, Dr. Isaac, also an African American woman with allowing her the space to assert her personal identity. She appreciated that Dr. Isaac understood her lived experience, and provided her with professional opportunities that recognized this, including suggestions of contemporary repertoire by African American composers.

Identity Tools And Strategies Brought To The Profession

Throughout the course of the study I noted, in observations and interviews, the presence of both discursive and performative identity tools that the pre-service music teachers used to signal their belonging. Some of these were protective strategies used to deflect or prevent critique, while others served to demonstrate capability or talent in the professional field. Interestingly, these strategies and performances were not always contextually focused in music education. In some cases, students demonstrated knowledge of music history, listed performance experience, or even described what music education was not in order to convince myself and others of their ‘successful’ socialization. In some instances, discursive strategies used by participants functioned as a tool to distance them from personal identities that they did not believe to be associated with professional music study. Below, I will discuss the identity strategies and tools located in the data, as well as the conditions from which they arise, as described by participants.

Knowledge Claims

As described above, some students demonstrated their belonging in the professional world of music through discursive performances that highlighted field-specific knowledge or skill. For example, Matt (a white man) would often sing excerpts from art songs or opera arias as comical responses to classmates’ comments. By connecting the subject matter of the songs to things that Dr. Hart or his peers had said, Matt created a casual musical banter that served to demonstrate his in-depth knowledge of the vocal repertoire. Perhaps for the same reason, Aaron spent a great deal of time during his interview reciting terminology, naming composers and musicians, and generally highlighting his knowledge of the professional field of music. As someone who had to learn the “language” of music very quickly, Aaron used this performative language to demonstrate his belonging in the culture of university music.

If I were an instrumentalist, I would be doing anything I could do on my instrument. I have a friend that is a cell player – a cellist, who is kind of like that in that he plays cello for a rock band, but he also plays Brahms on a regular basis. Or like really large works, like Dvorak. A good music major should do everything of their craft, and have something that they can focus on that’s an official university concentration, but also something that you’ve made your own. Cause, like, to just come here and sing English art songs, French art songs, German art songs, Italian art songs, with a sprinkling of opera – that’s the stereotype. But to really immerse yourself in what you’re doing…. I mean for me, it’s Spanish art song. I focused on Spanish art song and Zarzuela because that’s something that’s very interesting to me.

In the case of this interview excerpt, Aaron sought to highlight his belonging in the world of classical music, as well as his personal identification with the world of rock ’n roll, while at the same time loading the statement with vocabulary signaling his knowledge of professional music vocabulary and norms. For example, he corrects himself – changing “cello player” to “cellist” – switching from lay vocabulary to a more formal title. He also lists several composers, and is sure to list each of the languages that are generally highlighted in voice study. Even though the statement seeks to show that he is proficient in various musical spheres, he relies mainly on the technical languages of the Western Classical tradition of music.
Co-opting And Pre-empting Critique

In order to deflect or prevent critique, I noted that students took one of two approaches. In one approach, students would pre-empt the instructor’s critique with their own so that he did not have room to offer his appraisal of a recorded music lesson (post-performance). In the other approach, students made demands about minute details of assignments – namely a large portfolio project - so that they were able to ensure proper adherence in order to prevent failure, as well as negative critique (pre-performance). In an example of post-performance deflection of critique, I observed a one-on-one conference with Hannah, a very vocal young white woman who often dominated class discussion:

Dr. Hart says to Hannah, “Tell me about your videos.” (The students are required to film music lessons they’ve taught and comment on them as part of a portfolio project). Hannah replies, “They’re bad. They’re really rough.” Together, we watch several minutes of the videos that Hannah has recorded of her class. The students are semi-active in their participation, most are singing, but Hannah points out that their posture is not what she would want it to be. In our conference, Hannah cringes at several points when the students’ pitch is flat (below the desired pitch). Dr. Hart begins to offer some advice, but Hannah interrupts and says, “Ron, the first time I watched these videos, I cried. I hated them.”

In this case, Hannah pre-empted a critique from Dr. Hart, acknowledging and highlighting her failures in the video. One possible explanation is that the above passage is a performance of her “critiquing skill” that serves to show her capability in one mode of musical knowledge to make up for a lack of ability in teaching. Throughout the conference, Hannah focused so closely on her failures and inabilities that Dr. Hart never had the opportunity to give feedback or suggestions for improvement. In this example, Hannah strategically used deflection as a tool to avoid criticism from Dr. Hart. By dominating the conversation, she was able to avoid negative feedback.

Limits For Capacity For Teaching Culturally Diverse/Different Settings

“Well, that’s what you get in a problem-based discipline.”

(Interview Participant, personal communication, March 21, 2013)

Dr. Hart, the music education professor observed for this study seemed to be particularly fond of this phrase. He spoke a similar phrase several times in personal conversation, as well as in two separate class meetings. In this statement, he refers to the idea that school or university music is a discipline largely based on skill development, where improvements are made through practice, performance, and critique. The field of music education is unique in that it represents a confluence of two professional pathways that are both characterized by the three areas mentioned above. A vital implication of this intersection of two fields is the idea that students are evaluated based on embodied performances in which their professional identity is inseparable from their personal identity. This poses a potential limitation when, for music educators, critique is a highly valued skill to be used for refining musical performance. Throughout this study, I observed the participants engaging in critique on many levels: critique of self, critique of the instructor, critique of peers, and critique of students. In several instances throughout the study, the participants sought to demonstrate their ability to critique in both discursive and performative ways, perhaps as a strategy to demonstrate their professional belonging in the field.

Negative Critique

In one class meeting, Dr. Hart began by saying to the class, “Tell me everything that’s bad about musical theater.” At this moment, Nathan, a white young man, perked up. The scene is described in the following excerpt from field notes:

Nathan, who has previously not engaged much during the class, says “YES! I am going to tear up this cons list!” Seemingly in excitement, he then begins to sing a jazzy version of Jingle Bells. Dr. Hart dictates directions to another student about how he would like him to set up a chart of pros/cons
on about musical theater on the whiteboard. As this communication is taking place, my attention is drawn back to Nathan, who is saying to Kathleen, “Cons…based on what I hate…I HATE musical theater!” As he says this, Nathan begins singing again and sits with his hands in the shape of a steeple, tapping his fingers together one by one. Perhaps because of the Christmas music, the way he speaks the sentence makes me think of a plotting Dr. Seuss Grinch, taking joy in negativity. Before Aaron can fully draw Dr. Hart’s chart, the students in the room suddenly seem to see what he’s asking for and begin to shout out negative things about musical theater. In this moment, they are more focused and participatory than they’ve been in the previous class sessions I’ve observed.

This class meeting was, by far, the most engaged that I’d seen the students. The invitation to discussion, framed in negative critique, triggered a joyful and participatory reaction from the students. In translation to the music education classroom, there is the potential for this type of discourse to open the door to negative critique of students, perhaps leading to deficit perspectives of particular groups and communities.

**Deficit Perspective**

Several times in the observations and interviews, I noted that the participants demonstrated a critique that reflected a deficit view of students. Deficit thinking includes language and beliefs that assume students or their families’ lack capability or authority because they differ in some way from the speaker’s identity or lived experience (Marx, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2005). This type of thinking can be based on race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, or socioeconomic status. In her interview Hope, a white young woman from a middle class background, demonstrated this kind of language:

> Surprisingly for it being a Title I school, it’s run very effectively. Like, all the kids are extremely well behaved; they want to be there. And all of the staff that’s there, they want to make sure that every kid gets the care, the love, and the nurturing they need when they’re at school, because a lot of them don’t have that at home. Like, I have a least one kid every day that doesn’t speak any English. It’s actually really interesting, there’s two self-contained autistic classrooms, and these kids are so far on the spectrum they can’t do anything for themselves. You see them come everyday, and the number of kids that you see that have those issues that you know aren’t cared for at home the way that they should be. Like, to see the TA’s that are with them give them so much love every day is really encouraging. And it makes it feel like a very loving environment.

From the first sentence, Hope demonstrated a deficit view of Title I schools. Though she praised the school where she is placed, she is still assumed that students at Title I schools do not care or want to be at school. Especially interesting, is how Hope followed up a statement about students not receiving love or care at home, with a sentence about students’ inability to speak English. Does she believe that students whose parents have not taught their students English do not care about their children? She also spoke about students with disabilities as if their parents do not love them, and places teachers in position of saving or “other mothering” (Delpit, 1995).

**Focus on Concrete**

Another tool used by students that could serve as a limitation for teaching in culturally diverse or different settings is the claim that they could only understand succinct, concrete discussion. Several times the students observed demanded concrete and structured methods of instruction and information delivery, citing their inability to grasp abstract or complex topics.

In one case, Dr. Hart dictated a chart to a student who drew it on the white board. Based on Dr. Hart’s direction, the student filled in the columns before assigning headings. Several students voiced their frustration and misunderstanding.

Leah asks if Dr. Hart can add headings to the columns, because she doesn’t understand the organization if there are no headings. Aaron says: “Oh I get it, we are going to have to look
at these columns and come up with what they mean as a part of the exercise.” Dr. Hart smiles and says, “Shh! You’re going to give away my secret too early!” Leah sighs loudly, and Melina says, “I still don’t get it.” Matt: “Me Neither.” Melina (sarcastically): “I mean, I’m a genius and I really don’t get it.”

Even though Aaron deduced Dr. Hart’s plan, the frustrated students continue their protest. They seem to maintain their confusion and obstinacy, even though they have not yet been asked to summarize.

(Fifteen minutes later) Apparently, the students are still bothered by the fact that headings have not been added. Hannah says, “Ron, I think you think we are smarter than we are.” He responds saying, “No you’re all very smart. Just stay on board.” I notice that Hope is still slouching and utters an audible “ugh” as she shrugs her shoulders. Leah says “Can’t you just give us a hint about what you are looking for?”

In these excerpts, the students appealed to clarity, denouncing their own intelligence, and claiming that Dr. Hart was asking too much of them. One possible explanation is that the students are truly more comfortable with concrete concepts and easy answers – perhaps a characteristic of students who have survived the pressures of high-stakes testing. On the other hand, this may simply be an offensive move that seeks to pre-empt critique from the professor, as described above. This concrete stance, which serves as a disabling performance, ties pre-service music educators to a very practical model of teaching, in which there can be simple answers for dilemmas encountered in the classroom. Additionally, it highlights a disturbing limitation regarding the participants’ ability to examine complex ideological constructs such as race, power, and oppression within the field of music education. Demanding straightforward, concrete instruction in their own classes may, in effect, provide an excuse for students to recuse themselves from engaging in critical conversations that would prepare them to teach in culturally diverse or different settings.

**Technology And “Shutting Off”**

Technology, in the form of laptops and smartphones, was omnipresent throughout the study. Although this observation may be more indicative of university youth culture, rather than unique to music, I wonder what influence these pieces of technology might have on expression of personal identity in the music education classroom. In many of the observations, I noted that students who became frustrated with the discussion immediately turned to their phones. There were several times when Tasha immediately turned to her cell phone after choosing to disengage from the classroom discussion. Notably, in the following example, her peers are attempting to talk about race and Tasha was one of only two students of color in the room.

The class is listening to Aaron speak with Nathan about what to do when musicals call for casting according to race and says “I cannot colorblind cast a show, and you sure as hell can’t do black face.” Tasha raises her hand to ask a question, then seems to bargain with herself about whether or not to ask it. She shakes her head, and says “No” out loud, and then puts her hand back down. Tasha immediately picks up her cell phone and begins typing something.

It was obvious that Tasha had a comment in mind, but chose not to express her feelings in the class at that moment. However, the fact that she turned immediately to her cell phone implies that she did find an arena to express a personal concern. After assessing the potential risk of asserting her personal identity, specifically addressing race, Tasha audibly stated, “No.” The risk, in this case, outweighed the benefit of weighing in on the conversation. It is of particular interest here that personal technology provides a real-time connection to the hidden transcript. As opposed to the public transcript, James Scott (1990) stated,

The hidden transcript is the discourse that takes place “offstage,” beyond direct observation by power holders. The hidden transcript is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript. (1990, pp. 4-5)
Assuming that the content of Tasha’s text contained a critique or complaint about her classmates, it is of particular interest that personal identity, for Tasha, is better situated in the hidden transcript rather than the public transcript of music education.

Implications And Applications To The Field Of Music Education

In the face of not just changing, but changed demographics of American public school students, the teaching force is still largely made up of white individuals. The field of music education has only recently begun to call for a shift in the way the field conceives of multiculturalism and culturally relevant or culturally sensitive pedagogy (Abril, 2013; Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Elliot, 1995; Jorgensen, 2002, 2003). Throughout my experience in the field, I have always found that music education has been touted as a subject that easily incorporates multiculturalism, thereby achieving cultural relevancy. It is my belief that this fallacy has led to a lack of critical reflection within the field. Through selection of repertoire or songs, music educators have attempted to highlight particular cultures or musical traditions. These educators, including myself, have validated this tokenistic practice, stating that by programming music from various traditions, we are acknowledging the personal identities and learning needs of culturally diverse students (Jorgensen, 2002). Though I am in agreement with the idea that all musical traditions are deserving of a place of stature within school music programs, I feel that this practice stops short of recognizing the social and political contexts of classrooms. Having said this, I believe that music educators must consider the fact that content, classroom instruction, and institutional structure can serve as oppressive forces that obscure the personal identity of both student and teacher.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) has stated that culturally relevant teachers “assume that an asymmetrical (even antagonistic) relationship exists between poor students of color and society. Thus, [the teacher’s] vision of their work is one of preparing students to combat inequity by being highly competent and critically conscious” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 30). For example, as Tasha stated, merely programming an African American spiritual does not automatically create space for dialogue about the institution of slavery, and is all the more problematic when taught to students of color by a white music teacher. Following this, the field of music education must create space not only for consideration of students’ personal identity, but also for critical examination of personal identity of the music educator. Many music educators are trained in programs that prepare them to teach white, middle-class students (Ballantyne & Mills, 2008; Koza, 2008). Though curricular requirements often include a university course in social foundations of education, these courses often exist outside of a musical context, leaving pre-service music teacher without concrete examples of culturally relevant practices in a music classroom setting. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) suggested, “most pre-service teachers enter a program that ghettoizes issues of diversity” and that curricular organization “suggest[s] that issues of diversity and social justice are tangential to the enterprise” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 38).

With the above in mind, it will be vital for music teacher preparation programs to politicize and problematize education within the context of the music classroom. Without concrete connections, pre-service music educators may continue to see the field as exempt from including students’ personal identity and voice in an authentic manner. Equally troubling, pre-service music teachers may seek to claim innocence or neutrality for the field, seeing diverse repertoire choice as having sufficiently connected personal identity to classroom curriculum. Also implicit in this assertion is the need to make visible the power that a teacher has in the classroom. In bringing this power to light, one could better understand how that power, combined with other positional identities, can serve to either encourage or deny personal experience. This is especially pertinent in situations where a white music educator is working in classrooms teaching students that are culturally different from them. For these educators it will be important to examine and make visible their racial identity, as well as their complicity in the hegemonic racial ideology that confers an additional position of dominance aside from their powerful role as teacher in the classroom (Applebaum, 2010; Sleeter, 2013).

Even as music educators seek to make space for what Randall Allsup and Eric Shieh (2012) refer to as a public pedagogy, we must also understand that
asserting personal identity in spaces where it has traditionally been denied will continue to involve a high level of risk. Thus, music educators at all levels must be prepared to respond to these assertions in ways that are affirming, but must also be willing to risk their own vulnerability so that students may offer critique. Barbara Applebaum (2010) suggested that humility, uncertainty, and critique emphasizing listening are dispositions that allow educators to maintain vigilant responsibility in acknowledging oppressive social ideologies. In preparing music educators to allow space for personal identity in the classroom, university curricula must include these as acceptable and worthwhile dispositions, stepping away from more traditional tropes such as control, management, and authority.

Another specific consideration for the field of music is the fact that both time and space will need to be made for critical dialogue in the everyday classroom. Kate Fitzpatrick (2012) described her experience in “losing an entire rehearsal” to discuss the racial context of a band arrangement. In a field that emphasizes public performance as product, music teachers are often unwilling to give up rehearsal time, which is already lessened by other school priorities such as remediation for high-stakes testing. Thus, taking time from a rehearsal for critical discussion entails risking the potential quality of public performance. There is also the possibility that the tenuous position of music education in the public school curriculum may prevent those within the field from offering critique for fear that music programs may be cut altogether. Additionally, in the current high-stakes testing climate, music educators often celebrate the fact that their subject area is not tested, and therefore maintains autonomy in curricular decision-making. It is possible that a stance that regards other subject areas as bearing the burden of oppressive schooling practices allows music teachers to disengage from critique, effectively excuses themselves as not being part of the problem.

Conclusion

In order to meet aims of social justice education, the field of music education must be willing to change in order to incorporate, not just accommodate, diverse personal identities, expressions, and lived experiences. This will entail a questioning of the traditional aims of music education and a willingness to re-envision our field and re-organize the associated priorities. While we encourage students to read music notation, we can also encourage them to engage in musical communities, jam sessions, improvisation, and even musical détournement (Débord, 1959). We must question why the world of university music appears as a “foreign land” to those who enter the field without dominant primary socialization experiences, when we proclaim music as “the universal language.” Music education researchers must ask how pre-service teachers make sense of critique from professors and peers, as well as how this critique translates into teaching attitudes, dispositions, and practice. Additionally, there is a need to juxtapose the desirable critical posture in music education with that of Social Justice Education (Bell, 1997; Bettez, 2008; Hackman, 2005; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). I am in agreement with Rhoda Bernard (2005) who stated that we must reframe music teacher education such that “our programs become contexts where we can nurture our students as whole people who bring their whole selves to the craft of teaching music” (p. 29). Furthermore, we must allow for students to see their personal identity not just nurtured, but also reflected in the practices, repertoire, and cultural sphere of school music.

References


