

## **Music Education as Transformative Practice: Creating New Frameworks for Learning Music through a Freirian Perspective**

By

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### **Abstract**

*The educational perspectives presented by Paulo Freire have been thoroughly analyzed and linked to the general education of children in urban America. Additional studies have focused on Freire's pedagogy in higher education. Nevertheless, the number of studies that have examined music education and the pedagogy of music teaching and learning as a kind of pedagogy of emancipation are far more restricted, have become available only recently and are still not widely dispersed or read. In this article, Freirian concepts serve to develop frameworks that define the philosophy of a Critical Pedagogy for Music Education. This new conception borrows from Freire's texts, and delineates practices believing that real learning to take place only if students and teachers alike are changed in and by the process of education.*

## Introduction

The educational perspectives presented by Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), have been thoroughly analyzed and linked to the general education of children in urban America (Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 1994; Shor, 1992; McClafferty, K., Torres, C. A., & Mitchell, T., 2000; Apple, 1982). Additional studies have focused on Freire's pedagogy in higher education (Freire, 1994; Macedo, 1994; London, 1976). Nevertheless, the number of studies that have examined music education and the pedagogy of music teaching and learning as a kind of pedagogy of emancipation are far more restricted, have become available only recently and are still not widely dispersed or read (Abrahams 2004, 2005, 2005b; Abrahams, Jenkins, Schmidt, 2002; Allsup, 2004, Regelski, 1998, 2004; Lamb, 1996).

In this article, the concepts developed by Freire serve to develop frameworks that define the philosophy of a Critical Pedagogy for Music Education. This new conception borrows from Freire's texts, and delineates practices believing that real learning to take place only if students and teachers alike are changed in and by the process of education.

Freire (1998) states,

A way of thinking that goes beyond the ingenuous must be produced by the learners in communion with the teacher responsible for their education. At the same time, it is necessary to insist that the matrix of both ingenuous and critical thinking be the same curiosity that characterizes all human vitality. The practice of critical teaching, implicit in a correct way of thinking, involves a dynamic and dialectical movement between "doing" and "reflecting on doing." (p. 68)

This dialectical movement is also the internal force in this article which proposes an analysis at macro and micro levels. It also considers philosophical, social and ideological aspects, as well as their ramifications for teaching practice, and for teacher/student and student/student relationships.

Educators routinely make curricular decisions such what to teach, why to teach and how to teach in their music classrooms. My preoccupation and hope is that through conscientization,

“the process of becoming critically conscious of the socio- historical world in which one intervenes or pretends to intervene politically,” (Macedo, p. xi) teachers may effect change that will transform the possibilities for music education in our schools. The transformation of both teachers and students needs to occur in order for real learning to take place. I propose that such knowledge, discovered through dialogue and experienced in and with the world, becomes an impacting and changing force. Additionally, such knowledge can generate experiences that are lasting and engaging to students who often see a great schism between *their* music and *school* music. Allsup (2004), quoting Bruner, makes an interesting point that corroborates such perception, positing that when we “educationalize” music, “we place limits on what is musically possible,” furthering the division above mentioned (p. 208). While agreeing completely with this position, I would propose that such issues need to be examined not only at this micro level, but also from a larger one; thus, leading music teachers and students to understand such constructs, and also to partake in action toward the creation of serious and engaged alternatives.

Freire (1985) submits, with a large choir behind him (Bowles & Gintis, 1974 ; Bourdieu, 1986, 1987; Wilson, 1999; Erikson, 1996), that schools have become places for social reproduction, prompting the necessary skills and social relations for the functioning of a socio-economic status quo. Schools no longer provide (if they ever did) the tools for critical thinking and transformative action. In this sense, schooling relates to what Attali (1985) calls a “commodified society,” serving as a conduit for economic and social reproduction. Music education in its curricular and philosophical conception, with few exceptions, adheres to similar practices, continuing to foster a positivistic understanding of knowledge and its transmission.

The linear and elitist face of the music curriculum continues to impart westernized concepts and ideologies. It is based on the respect for expert knowledge and the obliteration of cultural and social constructs. Music education works, accordingly to Freire’s criticism, to foster

the reproduction of dominant ideals, while alienating dialogue and critical inquiry.

Since its beginnings, research and practice, theory and action have been dissociated in music education. This situation has not in recent years (Yarbrough, 1996), although the more recent increase in interest and respect for qualitative methods is promising (Colwell & Richardson, 2002). Music students appear to be well indoctrinated by social-cultural norms and comply with dominant discourses that permeate (or should I say, are welcomed) music classes. Authoritarian pedagogical models and objectives, coupled with expert knowledge are more than tolerated. In fact, they are expected.

Music education, because of its particular dynamic, has the potential to reach as a transforming power to different realities; however, in order to do so it must go beyond considerations of musical syntax, aesthetics, and performance. It needs to relate to the realities of individuals and communities in which it engages. It must not only establish its value in cognitive and emotional connections alone, but also search for social and thus, personal, transformation.

To confront the unyielding need for more techniques, facts and methodologies, music education professionals must invite the inspection of music as ideology (Lamb, 1996). We must engage music educators in and expect our students to “reflect on the meanings of their experiences with music in relation to a socio-political world” expecting “their participation and contribution to their own learning” (p. 128). Freire (1986) suggests that education is more rewarding when it stimulates the development of “this radical, human need for expression.” Such a need for *expression*, has for too long in our field been connected to the ineffable, the emotional. Education can only be effective if learning is associated with creative acts that see expression not only as connecting to the emotional but most importantly as a critical understanding of the relationship between word and world. This is what I propose in the following pages.

### **Music Education in Context: A Freirian Analysis**

The positivist tradition has provided the norm for the thought of mainstreamed music education practice, and also for the majority of its research. Notwithstanding the importance of that research, the inquiries that are most pertinent and urgent for today are the ones connected to social and personal constructs. The concept of music education that sensitizes students to beauty, formally analyzing art-music, and developing aesthetic sensibilities, continues to be free from contradictions or challenges. Students do not question whose perceptions are being imparted as their own. This is not surprising however, for music teachers continue to view themselves largely as technicians (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), trusting in the research and opinions of the experts in the field, and shying away from developing their own inquiries, inside their own classrooms.

Besides the indisputable contributions the tradition of aesthetic education has made to music education philosophy and practice, it has served as an effective tool towards the alienation and loss of meaning in the practices of school music. In music education, aesthetic education has had as its basis not only the acceptance, but also the clear and open proselytism of such dominant culture. The complete disregard for social and individual realities was again mainstreamed in the field in favor of the development of individuals that were to be sensitized to what is “truly” beautiful and elating. Bourdieu maintains that art for art’s sake is a bourgeois concept, and according to him a comparison of working-class values to those of the bourgeoisie reveals a “shift in emphasis from substance and function to form and manner” (Morton, 1994. p. 82).

Music Education practice has been based on routine activities that do not foster communication. Instead, such practices promote the acceptance of preconceived notions, where the creation of value is based not on personal or communal parameters, evaluation and critique, creation and transformation, but upon syntactic intricacy and technical excellence alone. This

creates a structure that, borrowing from Giddens (1984), helps to reproduce rules and communication that are void of self. In such a context any new action, i.e., any new musical action, instead of using knowledge to engage in new creation and transformation, recreates old practices that constrain those same actions and preclude creation. Music education that adheres to traditional (dominant) discourses and its evasion from historical, political, and contextual constructs shortchanges students and disconnects them from the potential power music has to unite its “word” to the “world” of the students.

Freire proposes that power may be viewed in a dialectical way – as positive and as negative, with its mode of operation being always more than repressive. When working repressively, power has an effect on the psyche, understanding, on learning in a broader sense, on how the body learns tacitly, and on how habits translate into sedimentary history. Knowledge in this sense impedes the development of subjectivities and of different ways of experiencing the world.

The reproductive nature of such power can further lead to the refusal of emancipating forms of knowledge by those who could benefit most from them. Our music community often corroborates Freire’s description of the refusal to learn or to know in the face of knowledge that may challenge the nature of domination itself. For Freire (1986), culture was the representation of lived experiences and of practices forged within unequal and dialectical relations that different groups established within a given society at a particular point in history. The connections presented in the relationship between “word to world,” leads to what Freire calls “conscientization.” In other words, the process of becoming conscious of one’s knowledge, by engaging in learning that connects concepts to the learners’ own realities, leads students to the point where they “know that they know.”

Music education, centered upon conscientization becomes powerful. It goes against the

sedimentation of old practices and a refusal, on the part of music educators, to change. Individual power becomes and derives from a personal connection to one's cultural traditions and social relationships. Conscientization, and the power it generates, can be the impulse for musical knowledge imparted and developed in the classroom. Further, it allows students and their teachers to become the counterparts of an endeavor that connects their old worlds to new ones.

### **Critical Pedagogy for Music Education**

Critical pedagogies and critical theories appear as important solutions and paradigms to the envisioning of a new reality in music education (Abrahams 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Abrahams & Head, 2005; Abrahams, Jenkins & Schmidt, 2002; Allsup, 2004, Regelski, 1998, 2004; Lamb, 1996). They foster praxial interest and significance as they are supported by serious philosophical thinking and research based on qualitative, symbolic and phenomenological concepts.

The nature of teaching and teacher education is intrinsically related to dialogue and questioning. In such a view, not only problem solving, but most importantly problem posing becomes a higher priority. Counter to objective knowledge, Critical Pedagogy for Music Education is a perspective where students create new and personal challenges, and view music as something to be constantly questioned, changed and transformed.

The disparity between the necessity for critical awareness and the reality inside classrooms also has political and social outcomes. Lamb (1996) relates her experience in music education describing a disjuncture/discord between not only possibilities and reality, but also between "what is portrayed to the 'real' in music education and the actualities of music classrooms" (p.124). Here, the notion of two fronts seems to appear: First, the imperative for action toward real change and the transformation of realities. Second, the essential struggle that

fosters an awareness of the actuality of this reality. While music educators talk about the “creative process,” the end product always remains as the bottom line.

For music educators to empower their students, and provide a transformative education, they must refuse the unwavering will to aspire to what we have grown accustomed to be. Non-alienating teaching requires conscientization and the rejection of who the dominant discourse tells us we are. Personal meaning, interpretation, self- social-cultural understanding and expression, as well as a wider knowledge of the world should come first in the conceptualization of music education. Music can enable students to be re-introduced to who they really are, no longer being strangers in their own environment or succumbing to self-alienation.

Thus far, music education practices and ideologies are in synchrony with a society that is increasingly characterized by the accumulation of objective knowledge and expertise. This continues to lead us towards further uncertainty. Music education which has as its subject the most subjective of all the arts, finds itself drawn to what Habermas (1982) calls the rationalization of the lifeworld, where we cannot just “know” something, but demand it to be rationally justified. The understanding of the lifeworld of others is an essential paradigm of music education. Instead of valuing the communicational, social, inter and intra-personal, linguistic and affective possibilities of its subject, music education has privileged expert knowledge over understanding. In addition, music education has extrinsic value over meaning and directive information over dialogue and interaction.

That means making such experiences in their public and private forms the object of debate and confirmation. Freire (1985) writes that good readers are looking for passages that relate to their own perceptions and preoccupations, and that learning needs to be about re-inventing and re-creating rather retention and memorization. Music education needs to connect the experiences that students and their teachers bring to the classroom. Music classrooms can be



the most opportune place for this to happen. Music education could impart knowledge through the eyes and voices of individuals that, themselves, constitute these cultural and social backgrounds rather than through harmonious consensus and careful representation of certain cultural and social elements, traditions and practices. "As a referent for change," writes Freire (1985), "education represents a form of action that emerges from a joining of the languages of critique and possibility" (p. 56). Problematizing what is presented to them and their own perceptions and self-concepts music can not only be transformed from noun to verb, but most importantly can become a verb of power (Schmidt, 2002).

### **Word & World: Transformative Action**

In his book, *Noise: The political economy of music*, Jacques Atalli (1985) suggests that music as an act that is imbued by meaning and is developed as an autonomous activity has had a significantly short history. He explains that music has been historically "submerged within a larger totality" and today, music is found everywhere. More importantly or disturbingly, music pervades society as an element that is both economic and social. In a society where economics are front and center, music becomes a commodity. In Atalli's words, "[music] now heralds a society of the sign, of the immaterial up for sale, of the social relation unified in money" (p. 4).

When they enter their classrooms, music teachers cannot forget the society we now face since the students know it well. Therefore, music should be more than an object of study or a discipline. Instead, music as a way to perceive and engage interactively with the world is the appropriate perception. Thus, through listening to and creating what is musical in the world students and their teachers come to understand what is extra-musical in it (socio-political, cultural reality). Transformation can take place for both students and their teachers when the new word, that is music, is created with and within the outside world.

New questions emerge when one embraces this conception of music education. What role

does music education play in the larger educational picture and what role could it play? What is the role of conflict, inquiry, and dialogue in the development of these new paradigms? Who is allowed to participate in the dialogue, at both the macro and micro levels? How can music education develop research that is focused on social-cultural-philosophical aspects, and that leads the profession to search for educational and social equality? If oppression is the inability to ask questions, how can music as a subject which is based upon creation and transformation, and consequently on inquiry, be an engine for consciousness and development of meaning? What is the role of music in our students' and their teachers' intertwined lives?

Music education as transformative practice, embraces problem posing, a connection of word to world, and a goal that leads to conscientization. It challenges teachers to engage in dialogues that conceptualize music not as an object but as a conduit for understanding. Music education, centered upon conscientization becomes powerful. It goes against the sedimentation of old practices and a refusal, on the part of music educators, to change. Individual power becomes and derives from a personal connection to one's cultural traditions and social relationships. Conscientization, as conceptualized by Freire, and the power it generates, can be the impulse for the musical knowledge music teachers impart and develop in their classrooms every day.

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