

*ALL EDUCATION IS POLITICAL, TEACHING IS  
NEVER A NEUTRAL ACT*

*CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN MUSIC  
EDUCATION, A CRITIQUE.*

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The make-up of Canadian classrooms is increasingly diverse with growing numbers of students of different abilities, genders, sexualities, races and at times social class. However, heteronormativity, whiteness, euro-centric perspectives, able-body centric classrooms and class privilege reflect the social norms which are still perpetuated in the broader school environment (Eg. Kelly & Brandes, 2001; Nkoane, 2012; Stiegler, 2008; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). As stated in the 2010 survey, *Coalition for music education in Canada*, band is the most common music opportunity for students in secondary schools in all regions of the country (Hill Strategy Research, 2010). The high school band room is a place where teachers are trained to impart to their students along with music performance skills, the values and habits of hard work, dedication, perseverance, as well as an appreciation for beauty and creativity. But can this be achieved in a way that adequately harnesses and builds on the complex dynamic of the diverse perspectives and lived experiences that exist within a band room? Music classrooms specifically, have an even higher likelihood of limiting access to students who do not fit the ‘musical status quo’; white, able bodied, heterosexual, male (Bates, 2012; Gould, 2012; Gustafson, 2008; Lamont & Maton, 2010; Rabkin, Hedberg, & Arts National Endowment, 2011). Politics are an important influence in schools; as Paulo Friere stated in his 1968 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: “all education is political; teaching is never a neutral act” (p.19). I began this research by reviewing the literature of music education academics that explores critical pedagogy and/or social justice education particularly pertaining to the band room. Using critical social theory as well as post-critical theory as frameworks, I will critique the ‘blanket approaches’ recommended by critical pedagogues and social justice music educators. I will demonstrate that in our pluralistic society, these areas of study must consider and thoroughly explore diverse

philosophical, historical and racial perspectives which are in a perpetual state of evolution. I will then address the question: how do we prepare future teachers?

### **Democratic education**

Formal music education in North America has long been defined as mentor-apprentice, top-down teaching. (Brandes, 2001; Allsup, 2003, 2007; Benedict & Schmidt, 2007; Jorgenson, 2015; Kelly & Spruce, 2015). In his book, *Remixing the classroom: Toward an open philosophy of music education* Randal Allsup (2016) noted that, “the benefits of the Master-apprentice relationship come with a human cost, and this cost, if it is too great, is at odds with the values of a democratic Society” (p.28). In the high school band room, a conductor typically instructs students from a podium as to what to play, when to play, and how to play. Music and general education scholars have been outlining the issues pertaining to the top-down, or ‘banking approach’ for many years (Dewey, 1916; Greene, 1988; Gould, 2003, 2005, 2009; Jorgensen, 1997, 2003). They have pointed out that power structures which establish the teacher as the knower of information and the student as a blank slate or ‘tabula rasa’, serve to ignore or invalidate the knowledge and experience that the student already holds. This creates a dynamic wherein pupils remain subservient and compliant to their teachers.

The progressive school movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or enlightenment period (Dewey, 1916; Montessori, 1909/1964; Sheehy, 1946) outlined ways in which this top-down approach hinders and limits learning in formal education settings and proposed *democratic learning* as a more effective pedagogical approach. Democratic learning is based on dialogue that allows for shared decision-making to shift power structures within the classroom in a fluid manner (Bedie, 1996; Jorgensen, 2001; Allsup, 2003; Abrahams, 2005; Finney, 2010; Spruce, 2012). In this collaborative teaching environment, teachers learn from their students, and vice

versa, students learn from their teachers. Friere, 1970, stated that by giving students a voice, they “become jointly responsible for a process in which all may grow. In this learning dynamic, arguments based on ‘authority’ are no longer valid” (p.61). Democratic education has as its primary goal the decentralization of power to develop greater equality within classrooms.

### **Critical pedagogy**

The enlightenment period also gave rise to the critical pedagogy scholarship developed in the Frankfurt school’s critical theoretical tradition; it was greatly influenced by the work of Karl Marx which was centered on socioeconomic equality. Marx argued, in essence, that social justice is dependent upon economic conditions (Breuing, 2011). The *Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School* were established in 1923 and they incorporated the influences of Karl Marx in their ideas on schooling; more specifically, they focused on the ways that “schools encourage dependency and a hierarchical understanding of authority, and provide a distorted view of history and other ‘taken-for-granted truths’ that in turn, undermine the kind of social consciousness needed to bring about change and social transformation” (Breuing, p.4). In the late 1970’s and 80’s a group of scholars in North America who called themselves *The Left Scholars* and included Giroux, Simon, Apple and McLaren took the more progressive parts of Dewey’s principles and further refined them. McLaren (1998) said that critical pedagogy “is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationships in classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society and nation state” (p. 45). Ellsworth (1995) said that critical pedagogy was “launched from the position of the ‘radical’ educator who helps students to recognize and name injustice, who empowers students to act against their own and others’ oppressions, who criticizes and transforms their own understanding in response to the understandings of the

students” (p.305). She goes on to say that the goals of critical pedagogy were “critical democracy, individual freedom, social justice, and social change. A revitalized public sphere characterized by citizens capable of confronting public issues critically through ongoing forms of public debate and social action” (p.306). Critical pedagogy is intended to enable teachers to create a diversified and accessible music program that will provide students with the space to make decisions about all facets of the classroom, but it does not set out or prescribe a particular curriculum. Rather, it encourages learning experiences that are multiple and diverse and that are liberating by interrupting traditional or established systems of oppression (Lather, 1995). Critical pedagogy is informed by critical theory and offers alternative approaches to teaching and learning. Schmidt (2002) notes that through critical pedagogy, teachers may effect change that will transform music education. One of the ways that critical pedagogy as well as social justice education assert themselves as democratic is by giving students a more prominent voice in all matters relating to the classroom (Dewey, 1916, 1963; Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Allsup, 2003, 2016; Spruce, 2015). Spruce (2015) states that a socially just approach to music education is one in which students not only participate in music education but are also included in decision-making about curriculum, pedagogy, construction of musical knowledge, understanding and value.

### **Social justice in music education**

Social justice has become very trendy in music education (Bowman, 2007). There is an ever-growing field of social justice in music education as evidenced in the recent publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Social Justice in Music Education (2015)*. Justice has many meanings and applications which are critically and clearly outlined in Jorgenson’s opening chapter of the handbook, where she states that “social justice necessitates making the point that all will be

better off in a civil and humane society in which everyone is regarded as precious, worthy of respect, and treated with dignity. When minorities are valued within the school community, all its members grow physically and spiritually, and the process of education is enhanced for students and teachers alike” (p.11). She further remarks that there is often ambiguity involved when defining the term social justice which can be framed in many diverse and at times polarizing ways (Jorgenson, 2015). This can present a problem because often, social justice is discussed in general terms; we hear statements such as: “this music program is for social justice” while not having a clear understanding of the ways in which a program is socially just. Bowman says in her article *Who’s asking? (who’s answering?) Theorizing social justice in music education* that “In short, well-intending authors tend, at times, to write as if it were perfectly clear what social justice means and as if achieving socially just practices in music education were simply a matter of making minor technical adjustments to instructional method and content. It is not” (Bowman, 2007). Indeed, there is a recurring habit of making blanket statements that are typically unproven and inflated claims about socially just music education; El Sistema based literature is an example of this phenomenon (Booth, 2009; Govias, 2011; Tunstall & Booth, 2016). It contains sweeping statements such as “The minuscule skills that it takes to refine the intonation of a note on the violin proves to be exactly the skill set needed to disrupt the cycles of poverty that have defied the best efforts of humans’ best organizations”(Witkowski, Borda, Botstein, & Abreu, 2016, p. 58); and as well, the statement that “The fundamental mission of El Sistema is not only to help children but often, literally, to rescue them”(Tunstall, 2012, p. xii). Details or specifics as to how El Sistema actually does disrupt cycles of poverty and the extent to which it rescues children remain unclear.

In the spring of 2016, I attended a conference entitled *Reframing El Sistema*, where the multiple perspectives of El Sistema as it has been adapted in North America were discussed. Participants claimed that their program had a ‘social justice’ orientation, but in reality, they were using the term more narrowly to define greater accessibility to music education. There was little or no discussion or exploration of other ways that music programs can be ‘social justice’-oriented to address such issues as racism, classism, sexism, ableism, or transphobia that impact students, their communities and staff on a daily basis. In many North-American contexts, El Sistema is intended primarily to serve students of color; but I wondered about the effectiveness of such a program when in fact there were only five or so people of colour out of the one hundred program leaders, teaching artists, academics and students in attendance at the El Sistema conference. One might be skeptical of this group’s receptiveness to diverse perspectives and cultures given their constituency, the lack of diverse voices, and the inherent assumption that the musical preference of students from different countries is for classical music. Indeed, when faced with a presentation which challenged this current reality, some members of the conference left because their legacy was being critiqued. Finally, no community members were present to be heard or to participate in the decision-making. Indeed, claims of music education for social justice are often paid lip service but fail to translate into effective classroom or administrative practices; at worst, they may even ignore and as such undermine authentic social justice work being done in music education.

### **Pedagogy for empowerment**

Another similar movement is that of *pedagogy for empowerment*, which challenges the relationship between the margins and the centers of power in educational institutions, and strives to redistribute power more equitably. It rejects distinctions between refined culture and popular

culture so as to make curriculum knowledge reflect and respond to popular and more commonly shared knowledge that integrates the cultural and historical experiences of diverse people (Nkoane, 2009). One of the defining aspects which ties these social justice pedagogies together is their goal of giving students a voice in order to rebalance the power dynamics inherent in the classroom (Dewey, 1916; Ellsworth, 1989; Freire, 1972, 1998; McLaren, 1996; Kelly & Brandes, 2001; Leonardo, 2004; Jorgenson, 2015). Given the similar nature of social justice education and its linkages to critical pedagogy, for the purpose of this paper I include it with the other enlightenment period liberal pedagogies such as critical pedagogy, pedagogy for enlightenment and democratic education.

### **Critique of critical pedagogy**

In referring to Ellsworth (1989), Lather (1995) shares the opinion that “such (critical) pedagogies have failed to probe the degree to which ‘empowerment’ becomes something done ‘by’ liberated pedagogies ‘to’ or ‘for the as-yet-unliberated Other’, the object upon which is directed the “emancipatory actions” (p.122). Lather goes on to explain that scholars in the field of critical pedagogy, have generally undertheorized the meaning of ‘empowerment’, and in attempting to ‘liberate the oppressed’, critical pedagogues simply perpetuate the relationship of domination. Lather believes that we have to subject critical pedagogy to a postmodern/post-structural critique by deconstructing its assumptions respecting such concepts as ‘emancipation through discussion’ (Lather, 1995).

Ellsworth outlines some of the problematic aspects of critical pedagogy in her 1989 article *Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy*. She quotes Audre Lorde who stated that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”. Rationalism is the preferred ‘tool’ of critical pedagogues who suggest that



“students and teachers can and should engage each other in the classroom as fully rational subjects” (p.306). However, this is problematic; rational argument is perceived to exist in a dichotomy between the rational and its opposite irrational other. Historically, the latter has been understood as being women, and other ‘exotic others’ (p.302). Ellsworth states as well that “In a classroom where ‘empowerment’ is made dependent on rationalism, perspectives that would question the political interests (sexism, racism, colonialism, for example) expressed and favoured by rationalism would be rejected as ‘irrational’ (p.306). Bernstein (2000) and Spruce (2013) built on this idea in saying that it “is often only those students who are able to articulate the sanctioned or ‘legitimate text’ who are heard or considered within the ‘acoustic’ of school” (p.34). Spruce continues to say that because they have command of the ‘legitimated text’ (rational thought for Ellsworth) their voices are heard over the voices of students who will not “articulate the sanctioned text”. Allsup (2016) quotes critical pedagogue Giroux’s view by stating that turning the teacher into a learner by fostering an environment where students discuss and ‘teach’ their diverse experiences and perspectives will lead to a ‘pedagogically progressive’ approach. Although such statements of empowerment through dialogue may create the illusion of equality, the authoritarian nature of the teacher-student relationship typically remains intact; the ‘progressiveness’ of this type of pedagogy remains unproblematized and untheorized (Ellsworth, 1989).

When asked ‘empowerment for what?’, critical pedagogues will answer in ahistorical and depoliticized abstractions. These include, empowerment for ‘human betterment’ to expand “the range of possible social identities people may become (and) make one’s self present as part of a moral and political project that links production of meaning to the possibility for human agency, democratic community and transformative social action” (Ellsworth, 1989). As a result, there is

no identifiable social or political position, institution or group that can be challenged, and nothing concrete upon which to build. Student empowerment has been defined in the broadest possible humanist terms.

### **Critical pedagogy in music education a critique**

Some of the most recent publications in music education philosophy, including both, *Remixing the classroom (2016)* by Randal Allsup, a prominent scholar in critical music pedagogy, and as well, the *Oxford Handbook for Social Justice in Music Education (2015)* remain prominently rooted in democratic educational theory and practice. However, I argue that music education must continue to be critical of, and continuously test, pedagogical approaches to better adapt them to changing times. Lather (1995) states that “If deconstruction is about probing the limits of what we cannot think without, deconstructing ‘critical’ is as necessary to critical pedagogies as deconstructing the term ‘woman’ is to any ‘forwarding’ movement of feminism” (p.13). Allsup (2016) mentions that he is aware of Ellsworth’s work and states that “she [Ellsworth] asks us to consider that all formal educational settings have the potential to be authoritarian, including those that espouse socially just values. With her caveat in mind, I still believe that defenders of hierarchical relationships have a special burden of proof if they wish to justify their method and approach. They may point to efficiencies in the learning process or lay claim to cultural authenticity of some kind of other, but no justification can be made to defend actions that are oppressive” (p.28). Allsup then continues throughout his book to use democratic education as the answer to de-hierarchizing the music classroom, while failing to incorporate any of Ellsworth’s perspectives. Indeed, Allsup’s philosophy, which is deeply rooted in democratic education’s call for students to have more of a voice in education, is not critically challenged in his book.

## **The issue of 'voice' in critical pedagogies**

Shor and Friere stated that: "It [critical pedagogy] is a strategy for negotiating between the directiveness of dominant educational relationships and the political commitment to make students autonomous of those relationships; the student is 'empowered' when the teacher 'helps' students express their subjugated knowledges" (p.30). Ellsworth (1989) asks: "how does a teacher 'make' students autonomous without directing them?" (p.309). Often these are students from disadvantaged or subordinated social class, racial, ethnic, and gendered groups as well as middle-class students who lack critical analysis skills, and whose voices have been silenced or distorted by oppressive cultural and educational influences. Students who speak in their 'authentic voices' are deemed by critical pedagogues to be students defining "themselves as authors of their own world" (Simon, 2009); this in turn, according to critical pedagogues, gives students the capacity to use their voice in becoming agents for social change (Allsup, 2003, 2016; Davis & Roswell, 2013; Dewey, 2010; Leonardo, 2004). Ellsworth states that "While critical educators acknowledge the existence of unequal power relations in classrooms, they have made no systematic examination of the barriers that this imbalance throws up to the kind of student expression and dialogue they prescribe" (p.309). Critical pedagogy aims to end student oppression, yet the literature does not problematize the significance or influence of the perspective that the teacher brings to class such as the social movement interests of their own race, class, ethnicity, gender, as well as other personal or preferred perspectives. In fact, "s/he does not play the role of disinterested mediator on the side of the oppressed groups" (p.309). By default then, critical pedagogy reproduces the category of generic 'critical teacher' guided by 'classical liberal thought' (p.310). This generic critical teacher is modelled on the currently established 'mythical' norm of music teachers as young, White, Christian, middle-class,

heterosexual, able-bodied, thin, and rational person; this profile is also reflected in teacher candidates throughout Canada (Solomon, 2003; Falkenburg & Smits, 2007; Egbo, 2012; Riches, Wood, & Benson, 2015). The idea of a variant to the norm such as a queer teacher or a person of color is typically discounted as only an exception to the fundamental belief that “underneath, we are all the same” (Ellsworth, 1989; Toomey et al., 2012; Spruce, 2015). But increasingly, the voices of difference are not exceptions to said norm; they exist as a multitude of diverse oppositions. It is necessary to go beyond the parameters of this mythical norm and establish an inclusive learning forum to hear these often intersecting ‘other’ voices. The literature does not explore how these ‘other’ voices will be construed in “opposition to the teacher/institution when they try to change the power imbalances they inhabit in their daily lives, including their lives in schools” (Ellsworth, p.323).

The assumption in social justice and critical pedagogy is that the silence of a marginalized group is a lost voice or voicelessness. Ellsworth points out that “Marginalized students are just not talking in their authentic voices, or they are declining/refusing to talk at all to critical educators who have been unable to acknowledge the presence of knowledges that are challenging and most likely inaccessible to their own social positions. What they/we say, to whom, in what context, depending on the energy they/we have for the struggle on a particular day, is the result of conscious and unconscious assessment of the power relations and safety of the situation” (p.313). Student power dynamics and relations are not adequately discussed in critical pedagogy either. Why not consider how sharing space influences the classroom dynamic? When is it appropriate to openly discuss and challenge the dynamics of socially constructed positions of privilege or subordination? If we consider the classroom scenario where one of the twenty students is a black woman, two of them are queer and one is disabled, will the black

woman feel comfortable and understood enough to discuss her experiences of being silenced? Or, will the white woman feel comfortable discussing patriarchy and its applications in music education while still acknowledging her race/class privilege? Critical pedagogues speak of ‘a’ student voice when in reality, voices reflect different identities, backgrounds and experiences. And this is rendered complex by the fact that one person may have and express a plurality of voices depending on his or her experiences and make-up. Will the mythical norm that defines a teacher be sufficient to hear diverse perspectives and extend beyond the teacher’s own investments or predispositions respecting gender, race, and sexual orientation? “These investments are shared by teachers and students, yet the literature on critical pedagogy has ignored their implications for the young, white, Christian, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied man/pedagogue that it assumes” (Ellsworth, p.314).

### **The importance historical context as it is linked to the voice**

Allsup(2016) highlights the importance of situating ourselves within our historical context as pedagogues. Throughout his book, he emphasizes the importance of continuously adapting or repositioning pedagogy to the times; that is, to take what we have learned in the past, and situate it in the present in such a way as to further affect change in the future. He states that “Only through this kinship between past and present can both continuity and innovation occur. Furthermore, only through this kinship can we identify what is wrong with our present course and try to re-chart it” (Allsup, p.60). And yet his framework of critical pedagogy ignores the current and historical context of the voices he is trying to amplify. Ellsworth believes that “Because all voices within the classroom are not and cannot carry equal legitimacy, safety, and power in dialogue at this historical moment, there are times when the inequalities must be named and addressed by constructing alternative ground rules for communication” (1989, p.321) Allsup

discusses no such set of alternative ground rules and states only that we must prepare students with conceptual and material tools to “operate confidently in unpredictable arenas” (2016, p.56). The single method that he suggests to do this is to establish an open-form classroom which does not have a ‘mentor’ who holds more power than students. There is no critical analysis and there are no implementation guidelines as to how we could practically achieve this state where no one person is in power. Rather, there is the assumption that this would happen organically as a result of students and teachers engaging in open and free discussions; and also, the assertion that through reflexivity, teachers can begin to understand their position of power and adjust.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is the ability to self-critique and identify ways in which your position in society has affected your views. Lawson (1985) describes this process as being “a turning back on oneself, a form of self-awareness” (p.9). Maxine Greene (1995) dubbed this as the concept of “wide-awakeness” “awareness of what it is to be in the world” (p. 35). When a teacher understands their position in society, notably as it pertains to their privilege, they can begin to truly acknowledge their own internalized prejudices. This is a continuous exercise of self-critique of a broad scope that includes considerations, such as: why we prefer teaching certain kinds of music; patterns of discipline – type of student targeted as well as the preferred types of discipline targets and types of discipline at school; the ways that my gender influences my teaching methods. “It requires the development of a disposition that seeks out what others choose to ignore, and one that considers the varied and insidious forms that discrimination and injustice may take” (Allsup & Shieh, 2012, p.49). Prior to Greene’s concept of wide-awakeness, Freire (1998) had introduced conscientization, an unfinished “requirement of the human condition...as a road we have to follow to deepen our awareness of the world, of facts, of events, of the demands

of human consciousness to develop our capacity for epistemological curiosity” (p. 55). For the purpose of this paper I have chosen the term reflexivity to also include this process. Ellsworth explains that reflexivity is a consistent ever-evolving process which stems from interactions with ‘others’: “The terms in which I can and will assert and unsettle ‘difference’ and unlearn my positions of privilege in future classroom practices are wholly dependent on the Others/others whose presence with their concrete experiences of privileges and oppressions, and subjugated or oppressive knowledges, I am responding to and acting within any given classroom. Practice grounded in the unknowable is profoundly contextual (historical) and interdependent (social)” (p.323). Judith Butler calls this “the violence of our own identity formation” (Butler, 2009, p. 172). It is only through this consistent act of reflexivity that music teachers can begin to peel back the layers that make up their own identity. Within this identity lies implicit biases and internalized prejudices which are often unconscious; in working through these layers, teachers can work deliberately to eliminate and further avoid harmful behaviors.

### **The liberal framework of critical social theory**

A large part of reflexivity consists of breaking down the reasons why we feel we can ‘save’ less fortunate students. Within the liberal framework of critical pedagogy Vaugeois (2007) states that “ahistorical approaches to social relations are particularly effective at erasing from view the existence of divisions according to race, class and gender. The advent of Western democracy is described as one wherein its ‘citizens’ are the beneficiaries of the work of enlightened forefathers who founded great nations and brought civilization to the ‘new’ world. As members of democracies, we are taught to exercise ‘our’ rights and responsibilities with a sense of justice based upon the primacy of reason and rationality” (p.164). This in turn assigns the enlightened rational people of the Western world to the reach out and save or educate the

‘primitive thinkers’. We can do this since we “are self-made by virtue of having overcome nature and the odds” (ibid). As a consequence, people who are in the mainstream of the citizenry and do not ‘fit’ into the image of a homogeneous democracy are mistakenly seen as weaker –namely, those who live on reserves, in ghettos and who are subjected to systemic barriers and violence, less capable, subjects of their own self-inflicted failures. Vaugeois goes on to say that “The idea of individual autonomy permits us to set aside violent histories of colonization and their ongoing manifestations, erasing them from contemporary social and economic relations. Specifically, discourses that place autonomous individuals at the center of philosophical discussion do not require that ‘we’ (identified as rational agents) question how we have come to understand encounters with Others” (ibid). These discourses allow us to pursue these endeavors without exploring ways that our philosophical, political and economic orientations are constructed in relation to Others. This democratic narrative sets into place the idea that “we are self-made by virtue of having overcome nature and the odds. These are heroic narratives that produce particular understandings of ourselves: we are citizens, democratic heroes” (ibid). This same narrative is one which is referred to as the *salvationist narrative* (Vaugeois, 2007). It has been used by colonists in many countries across the globe to justify their imposition of the tenets of Christianity, democracy and capitalism on ‘primitive others’ as being in their best interest. Thus, enlightenment thinking made it rationally and morally acceptable to enlist Others in the service of civilization (Said, 1993). “It was considered ‘noble’ to convert Others to Christianity (by persuasion or, if necessary, by force) and it was considered entirely rational and moral to remove the ‘primitive’ in people in every manner including traditional, chemical and germ warfare or confinement to substandard tracts of land, whenever that helped colonists (colonizers) to thrive” (Vaugeois, p.185)



I am not arguing that critical pedagogy plays the same role as colonialism; rather, I believe that the uncritical approach that existed in the salvationist narrative can be found in critical pedagogy and social justice education. “Liberalism teaches us that it is the citizen’s duty to ‘lift up’ the ‘underprivileged’ or the ‘underdeveloped’, and yet, this duty and the hierarchical relationships it fosters are predicated upon the notion of lesser Others -a notion developed assiduously during the Enlightenment” (Vaugeois, p. 166). These narratives of charity and altruism fail to question at the outset, how the people in ‘need of our help’ have gotten there; furthermore, there is little or no critical evaluation of whether what ‘we’ are imparting adequately addresses the broader, systemic issues or rather, simply applies a short-term quick fix.

### **So what do we tell future teachers?**

In the fall of 2015, I was a student in a seminar entitled *Critical Influences on Educational Praxis*; this course was designed for teacher candidates who were about to experience their second field experiences. We read the works of various critical theorists including Ellsworth, Friere, Hooks and Leonardo and discussed the ways in which we could turn these theories into pedagogical tools to develop an educational praxis. We explored questions raised by critical race theorists, indigenous scholars on decolonization, feminist critiques and disability theories. While wading through this theoretical material, prospective teachers kept asking the question: “tell me how to fix real problems and apply this in my classroom.” They wanted a prescription, solution or quick fix that would allow them to go on to their subjects - algebra, music theory or grammar. Unfortunately, theories and related practices of multicultural education, social justice-oriented, inclusive education and others are seen as a panacea, or blanket universal strategies that can solve matters and benefit marginalized students. Throughout this paper I have demonstrated how this phenomenon is harmful to such students and eventually,

to society as a whole. Due to the limited scope of this paper, I could not address the many problems with multicultural education and particularly how it relates to the field of music. A fundamental limitation and problem of multicultural education is that it remains a 'blanket solution' limited mostly to saying that we are addressing inequality, without specifically outlining the inequalities at hand (Egbo, 2012; Shor & Freire, 1987; Swartz, 1997).

But what is the process, the way forward to allow future teachers to find solutions? In actuality, there is no one solution. I do not mean that in a nihilistic way; rather the quest for socially just education is a constantly evolving process as historical and societal contexts as well as pedagogy itself are in constant flux. We strive to develop theories and best practices to understand our world, each other and to resolve problems. Today's solution, no matter how erudite, elegant and far reaching may well be tomorrow's 'problem'. Effective solutions start with a clear and shared understanding of the problem being addressed, however, no problem is unidimensional, as there are multiple perspectives and facets. Teacher education has the responsibility of wading through those issues, of situating teachers in relation to the 'other' in order for them to begin to conceptualize some of the issues at hand. For teacher candidates to understand the role of 'multicultural' education, social justice education, or critical pedagogy, it is necessary to thoroughly explore a base of critical social theory. Research shows that "While some teacher education curricula address diversity-related issues, there is little explicit discussion of race and how it is implicated in the outcomes of education for particular groups of students" (Egbo, p. 2). Critical race theory is a vast field which explores all issues pertaining to race and its many intersections; the same could be said about a multitude of identities, their own particular theories and their relation to the 'other'. Critical lenses can be applied to all facets of music teacher education from percussion techniques courses, practical instrument lessons, music

for children lessons and philosophical foundations. It is not enough to have a single class devoted to these critical theories, since this only allows one to scratch the surface of these complex issues. Rather, it is necessary for teacher education programs to shape the entire process in such a way that teachers and students critically engage with the materials at hand as well as the methodologies used. Simply studying ‘social justice music education’ is not enough to change the status quo. Too often, when academics and well-intentioned thinkers arrive at ‘the’ way, the solution, there is the mistaken hope that it will be universally beneficial and timeless with only minor adjustments along the way. However, the reality is less ‘comfortable’; there must be an urgency to understand and deal with the injustices that students face on a daily basis, and future educators must be made keenly aware of, and share this sense of urgency. As Benedict and Schmidt (2007) pointed out “the disturbing capacity of names, definitions, and concepts—‘social justice’ among them—to function as mere labels and conventions: as substitutes for, or deflections from the kind of critical reflection that is required, as comfortable habits of categorizing, representing, and simplifying, that relieve us of the need to change ourselves, or relieve us of the responsibility to question and modify our own actions”(p.49) Reflexivity which includes a constant evaluation of curricular choices as well as delivery methods is an ever-evolving process which must always adapt to the needs of students in the classroom as well as socio-political developments in order to stay relevant and be effective.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have provided a brief overview of the tenants of democratic education, social justice education, education for empowerment, and critical pedagogy. Furthermore, I used elements of post-critical theories, Marxism and post-modernism to outline problematic aspects of these educational frameworks. I touched on the un-critiqued uses and expectations of the role of

the student voice, the rather superficial ‘blanket use’ of these terms which can mislead one to conclude that problems are ‘fixed’ or resolved, without any realistic assessment or understanding of the root causes of issues, including the historical context and applications of educational frameworks themselves. In my attempt to find ‘the way’ to prepare teachers to be effective in the present times which includes reducing the propagation of systems of oppression, I found that there is *no one answer*. I have come to the realization that the most sensible approach may be to never settle on any one solution as universal and timeless but to continuously and reflexively situate ourselves in reference to the ‘other’ and to begin to see the ways in which we are consciously and unconsciously participating in perpetuating systems of oppression. As Bowman (2007) stated, “progress in areas like social justice, then, isn’t so much a function of identification and adherence to rules as it is a function of the elimination of continually emergent injustices...perhaps the only thing straightforward about social justice in music education is that it is not straightforward” (p.7).

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