This article was written by two gay music educators. Growing up in the Midwest, both of us were bullied, and one was beaten. One’s friend Jason committed suicide. Name-calling was an everyday occurrence. Band buddy was the taunt—a stand-in for words worse than queer (yes, even some teachers called us that). Years later, at a large urban high school where one of us teaches, five male students decide to wear heels to school and suddenly become victims of a cafeteria brawl. They are expelled, but no one else is, certainly not their attackers. Maybe this gives you flashbacks; maybe it does not.

Think about the moment when you could not do anything, or did not do anything, or did not know what to do. If you are a teacher, you have these stories. Stories of bullying, stories of apartheid schooling (Do you ignore it when all the students at your school who receive suspension are black?), stories where the inequities of the world intrude into your classroom in startling and sometimes incomprehensible ways. Are these moments hard to remember? Or easy? Will you take the sober advice a colleague once gave you, sympathetically, to look away? “It’s just not in your control, and you’ll drive yourself crazy dwelling on these things.”

In the spirit of sober advice and practicality, there is more to add to the list of “things that are not under my control.”

Having the courage to call injustice by name can be the first step toward changing the situation. Music teachers are in a special position to stand up for others.
immigrants and nonwhite communities, tremendous gaps in wealth and opportunity, increasing rates of poverty and dislocation, an unemployment crisis that appears never-ending. For many of us, the heavy toll of budget cuts on children in the United States and the schools they attend also feels “not in my control”; likewise, the baffling prioritization of high-stakes testing over school arts programs.

We are, after all, music educators. We are not—the rationalizing goes—the great civil rights leaders of our day, or wealthy philanthropists, or prize-winning economists. We work in schools. Schools. The big questions, the public questions, do not belong to us. But to follow this line of thought is to forget that very few individuals are ever “in control” of these things. It is also, we suspect, to forget the very reason we entered the teaching profession in the first place. It is to forget what it was we cared about at our best moments, when a career as a music educator promised something larger than steady beats and eighth-note rhythms.

The Imperative to Care
At the heart of teaching others is the moral imperative to care. It is the imperative to perceive and act, and not look away. Calling upon our best selves, we know ethically that we cannot ignore these things. Consider that we are educators precisely because we do not wish to ignore these things. Education, after all, is a public endeavor with an obligation to enter the public space. Consider that we work with music because the social life, the cultural life of our communities, is something we care deeply about.

This is a starting point for social justice, understood as a principled, even public, response to a perceived hurt or act of injustice. Just as education cannot be conceptualized apart from justice, there is no schooling apart from social justice, a claim shared by many. All are acts of noticing, listening, seeing, and responding. It is an insistence on what Maxine Greene calls “wide-awareness”—an open-eyed and open-eared engagement with the larger social fabric of our lives, and the diverse and particular ways that students reveal who they are through the work we do together in this public space called school. It is an orientation that is reparative and transformative. It is a democratic project.

But how? We firmly believe that no one is born a social-justice music educator. If anything, we suspect that teachers are born into their professional spaces with a sense of public powerlessness. We suspect that music teachers, in particular, enter the profession with a socially limited sense of sound. We just teach music—tones, rhythms, and sonic patterns. There are more than enough required curricula, standards, repertoire, festivals, competitions, and professional and personal demands, not to mention that voice of reason that warns, “You’ll drive yourself crazy dwelling on these things,” to eclipse the call to repair and transform. Yes, we may be very visible in our community, but is our curriculum public? Do we, in other words, embrace the difficult questions of our day? Does music instruction define the limits of all that we control?

Seeing More, Hearing More
A starting point, then: notice inequity. Name the inequity. There is no teaching for social justice without an awareness of the inequities that surround us, and a sense of indignation or even outrage at the “normal” state of affairs. Consider Jane Addams. It was this very sense of social injustice that led Jane Addams in 1889 to create Hull House, a settlement for immigrants and the working poor in west Chicago. In Addams’s case, she experienced a kind of moral awakening, the dawning recognition that a gulf existed between the state of “what is”—the indecent treatment of workers in the factories and slaughterhouses of industrial Chicago—and a belief in “what ought to be.” All children ought to be safe, well fed, and educated. All adults ought to have housing, the opportunity for good wages, and a sense of well-being. Noticing and naming the problems of her time led Addams to principled action. In this case, she established a settlement house, one that quickly blossomed into a de facto kindergarten, art and music school, and community college.

Brought up in a privileged family and raised to hold domestic values, Jane Addams’s courage and commitments were a surprise to most in her social class. To see beyond the normal state of affairs for Addams was the result of an independence of mind, one cultivated by a love of reading and travel through which she became engaged with the larger world and finally able to notice—really notice and then name—the problems of industrialism and the working poor. For some people, the dedication to work in social justice comes from an active pursuit of this kind of independence and openness, coupled by a deliberate engagement with our public spaces. For others, the dedication for social justice is immediate, because as historically marginalized people, the awareness of inequity is forced plainly upon them. Many would call it common sense to blame a cafeteria brawl on five black males who came to high school wearing heels—“The students brought it on themselves” or “This is inappropriate dress for school” (a comment that recalls the attacks on Muslim students wearing the hijab after September 11). For others, noticing the treatment of these students by their peers—relentless and unmediated bullying that finally caused them to go public and take a stand—is the first act of naming a societal wrong.

Disparities and Margins
Maybe this gives you flashbacks; maybe it does not. The fact that different incidents open different traumas speaks to the different ways our society is experienced. Beliefs about what is normal (and what is not) effectively limit our ability to perceive the world as
might be valued by music programs. As a profession, we need to examine the factors that lead particular students to avoid our music classes or to avoid speaking up in our music classes, or that lead parents to avoid entering the school for concerts or Parent-Teacher Association meetings. These factors are often the result of systems of marginalization that relegate people to the “outside” of our classrooms, schools, and public spaces.

Naming Our World

Try naming these things in your schools and communities now. For Eric, it is naming that his students with Individualized Education Programs (for students designated as having special needs) have the lowest grades in all his music classes. It is naming that because of the prominent use of violins, violas, cellos and double basses, his class has a cultural and socioeconomic bias, one that marginalizes particular groups of students and makes it harder for them to invest in their class work. It is naming the fact most of his school’s parent leaders are affluent and white, despite the fact that the school draws heavily from one of the poorest areas of New York City, with a majority black and Latino population. For Randall, it is naming the high cost of private tuition that effectively excludes whole categories of music educators from pursuing a graduate degree. It is the lack of social and economic diversity that drains vitality from important classroom discussions. It is the stated apprehension that early-career researchers will abandon qualitative accounts of the kind we have been addressing in this article because of a fear of being labeled “radical,” or the fear of facing rejection by entrenched journals and editorial boards because their research is too political or theoretical.

We believe that none of these things we have named ought to be considered “normal” no matter how commonplace they sound—no more than it was “normal” in Jane Addams’s time for women to be considered incapable of voting, or for children to be sent to work in factories and fields. Noticing inequities, and identifying them as such, takes a great deal of quiet courage. The very act of noticing sheds light on our own teaching techniques and attitudes. Why, as a profession, we need to examine the factors that lead particular students to avoid our music classes or to avoid speaking up in our music classes, or that lead parents to avoid entering the school for concerts or Parent-Teacher Association meetings. These factors are often the result of systems of marginalization that relegate people to the “outside” of our classrooms, schools, and public spaces.

Listening to Our Students

It is important to recognize that while it is necessary to name injustices done to groups of people, this can also result in affixing labels to individuals, regardless of our intent. Each of us lives uniquely at the intersection of multiple cultures and multiple selves, some privileged, some not. While it is our right to name (and rename) ourselves, it is quite another thing to be labeled by someone else. Even good intentions can reinforce stereotypes. There is never one way to be Asian, or gay, or Mormon. There is never
While we strongly believe in the musical value who are called on to realize them. They are never more important than the people who are helping young musicians become independent learners and lifelong music practitioners. How else do we respond to and possibly repair what we notice through our classroom spaces? This question is tricky in some ways, because the idea of responding and repairing highlights the situational nature of social justice. We do not believe there are specific lessons and activities that constitute “a social justice experience,” specific lessons that can be taught irrespective of the particular students involved, the particular school and its community context, or each of us as teacher-individuals who hold particular perspectives and notions. The problem that bedevils many music educators is that we want to know what exactly social justice looks like in a music classroom or rehearsal setting, and how exactly it is implemented. A concert trip to a nursing home may be advertised as socially just, but not if it is done for the purposes of public relations or pity. A traditional band program (one that plays Mozart and Holst) may not look or sound particularly radical, but may operate pedagogically according to radical values of inclusion, fairness, and equal opportunity.

One of the most important privileges music educators hold is the possibility of public performance, with an emphasis on the word public. When the audience becomes a community different from parents and teachers, and the performance is conceived as a response to that community, the work of performing and making music takes on a larger purpose and action. Recently, middle school students from the Metropolitan Expeditionary Learning School performed for the Greenpoint community in New York City, a neighborhood located on the site of the nation’s largest oil spill. Addressing this community in performance led the students to cover protest songs, such as “This Land is Our Land” and “Where is the Love?” with lyrics rewritten about the accountability of businesses and the need to clean up waterways. In the process, students found a musical voice in which to wrestle with questions of economic growth and environmental sustainability.

Another locus in our response as social-justice educators may be in the ways we encourage students to think about their creativity. The American Association of Creative Musicians (AACM), founded as collective of black musicians in the 1960s, developed a pedagogical practice that insisted on the individual participation of students and the classroom as a site of negotiation and collaboration.

### Suggested Readings on Social Justice


Going Public, Coming Out

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agency of musicians and students to create their “own” sound, different from that of the traditions around them. For these musicians and the school they created, composition and improvisation are taught as inseparable from political and economic response; they are responding to a culture and commercial industry that has been dominated by whites and that marginalized their voices as black artists. While the commercial industry has (perhaps) changed, its biases and hold on our students have not. The AACM, with its insistence on the non-neutrality of the musical act, was able to leverage the teaching of improvisation toward the development of political agency and a critical understanding of commercialism.

In many teacher preparation programs across North America, university music teacher educators are engaged in pedagogical processes that move students outside of private passions and personal expertise and into exploring wider ways of experiencing the music of others. Some of our mostly classical musicians at the university level are engaged in popular music processes in an effort to democratize music education (details about which can be found in an earlier issue of Music Educators Journal). At the Crane School of Music, SUNY Potsdam, undergraduate music education majors use collaborative inquiry to investigate the meaning of social justice, and how it intersects with their lives and others. As a culminating project, these students create curricula around the concepts of access and equity. The Westminster Choir College of Rider University has framed their music teaching practicum around critical pedagogy, asking teacher candidates to consider important questions, such as Who am I? Who are my students? What might they become? What might we become together?

These examples are starts, creative responses taken by music educators as we begin to find ways of taking control, of claiming power in our professional lives and the world around us. They are examples of noticing, of listening to our students and our communities, of taking action. The moment we accept that music teaching is more than the teaching of sound and sound patterns alone—that there is something non-neutral about music that requires our moral engagement—we enter into the realm of a public pedagogy. It is a calling that is apparent in the project of public education, an education for our public spaces, for living together. As teachers, the big questions of our time do belong to us, and to our students as well. They are not to be left for others to decide, and we cannot respond to them until we accept the call to move from our isolated classrooms and sealed traditions, and into a public space.

Notes


6. Three international conferences have taken place on the topic of social justice to promote discussion and advance research: International Conference on Music Education, Equity, and Social Justice, October 6–8, 2006, at Teachers College Columbia University; musica ficta: Lived Realities: A Conference on Exclusions and Engagements in Music, Education and the Arts, January 24–27, 2008, at the University of Toronto; and Race, Erasure, and Equity in Music Education Conference, October 20–23, 2010, at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.


