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by Randall Everett Allsup and Eric Shieh

# Social Justice and Music Education

## The Call for a Public Pedagogy

**Abstract:** At the heart of teaching others is the moral imperative to care. Social justice education begins with adopting a disposition to perceive and then act against indecencies and injustices. Teachers are public figures entrusted by a democratic society to act in the best interests of the children in their care. Music educators must embrace this social contract by “going public” or “coming out”—reaching beyond incomplete musical engagements and into larger and more intertwined social, artistic, and political domains. The authors refer to this stance as a public music pedagogy.

**Keywords:** advocacy, education, justice, professional development, public

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.” Maybe you are afraid that “getting involved” will jeopardize your career. Maybe the problems you see do not seem to have much to do with music.

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

*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.*

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> All are acts of noticing, listening, seeing, and responding. It is an insistence on what Maxine Greene

calls “wide-awakeness”—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.<sup>3</sup> 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 *in*justice that led Jane Addams in 1889 to create Hull House, a settlement for immigrants and the working poor in west Chicago.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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

if it could be otherwise. The imperative to look beyond the commonsensical is shared by all school educators, but the development of this capacity into a broader public awareness is far from easy. 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.

Disparities, to name one collective form, are more easily noticed but require attentiveness or wide-awakeness. We know that there are quantifiable differences in opportunity or treatment for particular groups of people. For example, the differences in access to high-quality music education, not to mention music education at all, is what instigated a series of conferences and research agendas over the past decade.<sup>6</sup> It has been too familiar to us as a music education community (and yet eerily excusable) that students who attend schools of a low socioeconomic status have less access to the arts and that schools with a higher percentage of minority students are more likely to experience deep cuts in music and the arts.<sup>7</sup>

More insidious are inequities that stem from the marginalization of certain groups of people. These are ways in which people are effectively dehumanized because they are not represented or given voice in a particular space, or they are excluded altogether. At a 2008 conference at the University of Toronto called “Engagements and Exclusions in Music Education,” attendees were asked to wrestle with questions many of us had not even considered: the portrayal of women in popular music, the opportunity for African American youth to take part in classical large-ensemble programs, the treatment of Native American traditions in music classes, the silence surrounding students who identify as queer, the exclusion of students with disabilities from instrumental music programs, and even the question of whether children understood as children (and not as preprofessionals, voice parts, members of a feeder program, say) 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, we ask, do we sometimes still feel apologetic about the place and purpose of popular music in teacher preparation programs? Why was it so hard to write the opening sentence of this article? Why are many of us afraid to admit that we do not know how to provide accommodations that work for many of our students with special needs in our music classes? Why do we continue to resist talking with our schools’ most active parents about our worries about inclusiveness?

Critical self-reflection takes time and emotional investment: precious time spent (say) disaggregating our grade books and classes by categories, such as gender and race, to see what the facts reveal. If music is an elective, who is selecting it, and who is not? Who is auditioning into university schools of music, and who is not? We believe, as did Jane Addams, that our dedication to openness relies heavily on fighting the deflating inertia of overconfidence and institutional bureaucracy, that our own education must continue across a life span of investigating the sociopolitical issues that dramatically influence student lives.<sup>8</sup> Like Addams, we are pushed to find fresh ways of understanding as well as to engage with those included and excluded in our various communities.

### 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

## Suggested Readings on Social Justice

- Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "Yes But How Do We Do It." In *White Teachers/Diverse Classrooms: A Guide to Building Inclusive Schools, Promoting High Expectations, and Eliminating Racism*, edited by J. Landsman and C. W. Lewis, 29–42. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2006.
- Benedict, Cathy. "Defining Ourselves as Other: Envisioning Transformative Possibilities." In *Perspectives in Urban Music Education*, edited by Carol Frierson-Campbell, 3–13. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2006.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1970.
- Maxine Greene, "The Matter of Justice," *Teachers College Record* 75, no. 2 (1973): 181–91.
- Elizabeth Gould, Elizabeth, June Countryman, Charlene Morton, and Leslie Stewart Rose, eds.. *Exploring Social Justice: How Music Education Might Matter*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Music Educators' Association, 2009.
- Jennings, Kevin, ed. *One Teacher in Ten: Gay and Lesbian Educators Tell Their Stories*. Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 1994.
- Noddings, Nel. "An Ethic of Care and Its Implications for Instructional Arrangements." In *The Education Feminism Reader*, edited by L. Stone, 171–83. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Oakes, Jeannie, and Martin Lipton. *Teaching to Change the World*. 3rd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007.

one song that fits an ethnic label, never one musical practice that encompasses an entire culture. The hyphenations that constitute our increasingly pluralistic society (the composites that may make us Asian American, gay American, Mormon American, or all three) make labeling ourselves and others increasingly problematic. Because of this, and because we work with students on a daily basis, our humility toward our own perspective and our capacity to *listen* to the perspectives of others are key to the work of social justice. Social justice is, after all, a *social* act. It is work that is inclusive and generous, and it requires the inclusion of those we wish to act with: our students and communities.

To listen to our students is to allow them to enter our curriculum with us as agents of change. They are not in our classes only to learn musical skills or established traditions from us; they are in our classes to *shape* musical traditions and social traditions that live and breathe and transform the world in which we live. In other words, musical traditions are never more important than the people who are called on to realize them. While we strongly believe in the musical

and social benefits of school-based large ensembles, like band and orchestra, or highly codified practices, like jazz, these are artistic forms that must be made relevant to immediate and future student needs, even if it means altering a practice or pedagogy. The band room, for example, has near-limitless musical and social capacity.<sup>9</sup> We can add guitar clubs, composition classes, and rock bands to an already existing line of auxiliary groups that have found a home in the contemporary band room—groups like drum lines, jazz combos, and chamber groups. By diversifying the band room space—metaphorically and literally—we 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 notices. 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.

## Going Public, Coming Out

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

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.<sup>10</sup> While the commercial industry has (perhaps) changed, its biases and hold on our students have not. The AACM, with its insistence on the nonneutrality 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*).<sup>11</sup> 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?*<sup>12</sup> Textbooks for early-career music educators are expanding the concept of music teacher identity beyond the performer-versus-teacher dualism to include more emphasis on the social well-being of children.<sup>13</sup>

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

1. William Pinar, *What Is Curriculum Theory?* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 21. See also Nel Noddings, “An Ethic of Care and Its Implications for Instructional Arrangements,” *The Education Feminism Reader*, ed. L. Stone (New York: Routledge, 1994), 171–83.
2. See John Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1909; New York: Philosophical Library, 1959); Henry Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy* (New York: Continuum International, 2011); Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (New York: Routledge, 2005); and Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
3. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Education, 2000).
4. Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Macmillan, 1910; New York: Signet Classics, 1999).
5. See William Pinar, *The Worldliness of a Cosmopolitan Education: Passionate Lives in Public Service* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 59–82.
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.
7. Kelly King and Sasha Zucker, *Curriculum Narrowing* (New York: Pearson, 2006); and *Access to Arts Education: Inclusion of Additional Questions in Education’s Planned Research Would Help Explain Why Instruction Time Has Decreased for Some Students* (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2009), 11–15.
8. Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Yes But How Do We Do It,” in *White Teachers/Diverse Classrooms: A Guide to Building Inclusive Schools, Promoting High Expectations, and Eliminating Racism*, ed. J. Landsman and C. W. Lewis (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2006), 37.
9. Randall Everett Allsup, “The Moral Ends of Band,” *Theory into Practice* (forthcoming).
10. George Lewis, “Experimental Music in Black and White: The AACM in New York, 1970–1985,” *Current Musicology* 71–73 (2001/2002), 108–28.
11. Randall Everett Allsup, “Classical Musicians and Popular Music: Strategies and Perspectives,” *Music Educators Journal* 97 no. 3 (2011): 30–34.
12. Frank Abrahams, “Transforming Classroom Music Instruction with Ideas from Critical Pedagogy,” *Music Educators Journal* 92, no. 1 (2005): 62–67.
13. See Mark Robin Campbell, Linda K. Thompson, and Janet R. Barrett, *Constructing a Personal Orientation to Music Teaching* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2010).