

Power to the People:

*A critical analysis and revitalization of the music education classroom through
the application of community music and value-added learning*

By:

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Abstract

Music education today is disengaged and desensitized to the needs of their students. Children blankly stare as they beat a hand drum in an elementary class, or sit totally disengaged in the back of a high school choral rehearsal. Why is this? Why do our children, who love and value music outside of school totally disengage from it in the classroom? The reason is that music education today is not what the child needs or wants. This philosophy analyzes the efficacy of community music and value-added learning through what is referred to as the human perspective, and attempts to provide a framework and vision of what a reformed music education classroom would look like.

Community Music and it's application in the 21st century classroom

Technology, the internet, speediness, and information-overload are all buzzwords of the 21st century today. However, community music is an aspect of a child's life that has remained constant. Community music for this philosophy is defined as any sort of music that lives outside of the confines of the educational system. Community music can be a drum circle, a garage band, a church choir, or even rap music played on a radio. It is

any sort of music that has social capital for an individual. Currently in music education, community music plays a very little role. Occasionally, a high school choir will perform an arrangement of a popular song, or the choir will perform a *Glee* medley. Aside from these sporadic performances, community music usually holds no place in the music education classroom of today. If constructivist teaching, teaching where the students construct their own meaning and make their own connections, is highly valued, why are music educators not implementing the essential connection between music of academia and music of the community? Currently, there is a hierarchical system in place between school music and community music. A hierarchy is created when individuals or groups in a position of power creates a values system, which in this case adds or diminishes the social value of a piece of music. Administrators and music educators continually honor the world of the long dead, Caucasian, European composer of traditional style. However, we now live in an environment where the vast majority of students are no longer placing social capital on that genre of music. The social capital lies within the rap music, the music at the child's home, and the music that has a place in everyday life.

The term social capital refers to a piece of music that holds significant value for a set of individuals and is valued within a societal framework. This directly relates to the critical perspective known as Critical Pedagogy. Critical Pedagogy advocates honoring a child's world by beginning in their world and using knowledge they already have (Abrahams, 2007). Using this framework as an example, we see the efficacy that community music and culture can play within an academic context. Culture is defined as a set of shared attitudes, goals, and values that characterize and describe a certain group or organization. However, America does not have a unified culture, due to the melting

pot of peoples that make up our society. The child's culture makes up the environment where he or she lives. Within one geographic location, many cultures can abound. For example, in the city of Syracuse in Upstate New York, you will find elements of both the big city and rural farmlands. Inner-city children have a different set of ideals, experiences, and influences than the children who live in the extremely rural tracts of land nearby. Such an extreme contrast in terms of demography shows the varied distribution of culture within a relatively small area. With this in mind, the realization should occur that finding popular community music with social capital and relevance is a tough thing to do. In *The Art of War*, a 5th century BC manuscript dictating the framework of battle, Sun Tzu states that: "water shapes its course according to the nature of the ground over which it flows; the soldier works out his victory in relation to the foe whom he is facing" (Tzu, 1910). The educator and students must advance equally on a plain, however they must be able to adapt to the environment around them. The responsibility of the educator is to provide the assets and tools necessary to reshape the course the students are taking while the community and societal trends outside of the school represent the grounds over which they all travel. The tools the educator provides must be meaningful and useful in the context in which the students are traveling. The common analogy "don't bring a knife to a gun fight" come to mind here. Why are we teaching our children in inner-city schools how to analyze a Bach Invention or a Mozart Sonata when they live in an environment where rap and hip-hop music is not only dominant, it is a way of life and respect.

Although using community music is recommended, there must be a steady balance in order to avoid pitfalls in using community music. In order to avoid the pitfalls

of using community music in the classroom, the concept of authenticity must be addressed. Authenticity is a piece of music that, in addition to holding social capital, also is approached and utilized in a way that is not discriminatory, racist, or belittling to any individual or group of individuals. An authentic piece of music is sensitive to the demographics of the classroom, the community around the classroom, and the social trends locally and nationally. If you are in an inner city school district, more likely than not, rap and hip-hop music will be more valued than country music. Utilizing country music in this situation does not hold any social value for the students, but is also inauthentic in the context in which it is living. The students do not have a personal connection to this genre of music and are not personally motivated because of it. The students will not be able to follow the ideals or framework within this genre accurately or respectfully. This is not to say that an educator should teach inner city schoolchildren rap music and children in the country bluegrass music. It is merely to state that we must be sensitive to our student's needs, wants, and aspirations. It is our job to adjust the tools we use in order to help them along their way. It is also important to bring elements of community into the classroom, for when we do that, we begin to see our children no longer from a teacher-student perspective, but from a human perspective.

The Human Element and Humanism in the classroom

The human perspective, or element, is a new way to approach the classroom. It is not founded in a methodology, but is instead founded in a series of frameworks and ideologies set forth by Freire, Dewey, as well as humanist thinkers such as Nietzsche and

Rousseau. Rousseau stated in his famous piece of literature *The Social Contract*, which monarchs and seats of powers in actuality are powerless, and the real legislative power lies within the people themselves (Rousseau, 1762). Educators have long thought of the classroom as their kingdom. The teacher knows all, and the students are blank-slated and powerless. Yet, with Rousseau's notion of a powerless ruler, we come to realize that holding a position of power is futile. The educator should provide a safe environment for their children, should provide tools for success, and should be guiding in case of emergency or a time of struggle. However, the teacher does not hold much power outside of that. The educator is in social contract with each student to progress as a unified front in order to succeed in the educational process. It is not acceptable then for educators to teach every class the same way. Each class has a different feel, and each class has a different makeup demographically and developmentally. Because of these differences, some teaching strategies used prior may not be successful in new classrooms.

Traditionally when this happens, those students are viewed as a classroom management issues or as an un-teachable student. You cannot teach just one type of student. Even within the context of mainstream students, there are different types of learners, as Bernice McCarthy discusses in her book *4MAT in the classroom* (McCarthy, 2000). If we place norms in the classroom, we set standards of who our children are allowed to be. As educators, we must realize that every student is in a different place developmentally, and sits on a different place on the zone of proximal development (Zone of Proximal Development, 1978). The human element brings the teacher down to the student's level and, all methodologies aside, calls for a direct, personal connection between student and teacher in order to get that student where they need to go.

The teacher must also implement value-added learning into their teaching. Value-added learning is learning which is meaningful and pertinent to the child's life outside of the classroom. However, value-added learning is only truly valuable if the connections being made are efficient. Connecting with children in the country about inner-city specific issues, although value-added, is not the kind of connections and valuation we are looking for. It must be specifically efficient for the socio-political climate around the school, must address the economics and demographics of the populace, and must retain the idea of efficiency in relation to the cultural world of the student (Abrahams, 2007).

Power to the People: A restructuring of school

This new music education classroom will no longer be the generic white-walled room in the back of the school that is exiled by those not actively involved in the program. On the contrary, the new music education classroom will be on the forefront and be the face for educational change. The first step must take place within the educators themselves. If music educators acknowledge that there is balance of power between student and teacher, and this balance is constantly changing, coupled with the facts that music education is a dialogue between student and teacher and that the students come with prior life experiences that can be applied to the classroom, real change can take place (Abrahams, 2007). The teacher must step down from the position of the omnipotent monarch of the classroom, and must instead obtain the mindset that they too are learners in the school environment. As soon as this philosophical transformation occurs, tangible changes can begin to be undertaken.

Methods must be regulated to a place where they are no longer the critical element of a classroom lesson, but merely a potential tool to be used by the educators when deemed appropriate. Replacing these older methods is a new multisensory approach, the human approach. Care must be taken to not all the human approach to turn into another methodology. In order to prevent stagnancy, we must not streamline and cut corners when it comes to connecting with our students. Again, the issue of authenticity plays a role. Rather than creating norms to connect generically to students, we must take the time and genuinely connect with each individual student. Again, this is accomplished through the abandonment of the teacher holding a seat of power, and instead embracing an open policy of being grounded with the students. The result is an approach to teaching that evolves, grows, and adapts to every student population.

The teacher must be sensitive to current popular trends, as that is where the child's world is centered around. The teacher must then self-assess and self-reflect. This process refines any lesson that did or did not go well, and allows room for improvement, innovation, student feedback, and the possibility of reformatting a lesson. The teacher uses student feedback to directly effect their own teaching, thusly creating an environment where there are constant connections being made between learners, both student and teacher, in a similar fashion to the synapse between two nerve cells.

Community music, such as popular rap songs, can be reformatted to apply directly to the child's education growth and even present opportunities for extra-musical learning.

Didactic learning is constantly taking place in this sort of education environment, with music educator and student on a level playing field. Not only is the educator involved with the student's musical world, he or she is also very sensitive to the implications that

home life, demographics, economics, societal trends, political events, and cultural shifts play a role on the student. Being an ever-adjusting educator, much as the chameleon constantly reflects the background it inhabits, provides the flexibility that makes learning possible for all types of students, whether they are a type I, a lower class child of a single mother, the brother to a gang lord, an orphaned immigrant from war-torn Bosnia, or the son of a landscaper. The environment created is not just an idyllic school system. Rather, it is setting up students to view the world in a different matter, where rather than focusing on the affects of power on other individuals, the focus is instead on how one individual can relate and interact with another individual.

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