

Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

The refereed journal of the



Volume 9, No. 3
October 2010

Wayne Bowman
Editor

Electronic Article

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ISSN 1545-4517

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Music Education for Social Change in the Secondary Public Schools of Costa Rica

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This article focuses on a recently implemented general music curriculum in secondary public schools, whose main goal is to address social issues in Costa Rica. The author describes and discusses its context, rationale, theoretical tenets, and proposed practices¹ with the purpose of advancing theory-practice reflection on music education practices within a geographical and cultural context—concerns congruent with the second, third, and seventh action ideals of the MayDay Group, but seldom addressed by conventional scholarship.

Contextual Perspective

EDUCATION AND SCHOOL MUSIC IN COSTA RICA

Education in Costa Rica is imparted at the following levels:

- (a) Pre-school (nursery, kindergarten, infant preparatory),
- (b) Elementary school (Grades 1–6),
- (c) Middle or secondary school (Grades 7–11),
- (d) Higher education (universities),
- (e) Special education (nursery through Grade 11), and
- (f) Community education.

With the exception of higher education, instruction is free and funded by the government. According to the Fundamental Law of Education of 1957, every inhabitant of the republic of Costa Rica has the right to education, and the State must provide for it (Asamblea Legislativa de la República de Costa Rica 1957). The Ministry of Public Education² supervises curricula and teacher education in both public and private settings.

Since the inception of music education in Costa Rica's public schools by the government in the 1880s, elementary and secondary curricula have been primarily content-oriented. Instruction has heavily focused on learning “the elements” of music, with special

emphasis on the Western canon and national songs and anthems (Rosabal-Coto 2001). While general music is part of the mandatory curriculum, additional programs for instrumental and choral education are usually optional, extra-curricular, and mostly dependent on the interests and available resources of individual schools.³

CURRENT SOCIAL SCENARIO

The history of Costa Rica in the last century has been an exception in Central America, a territory “historically dominated by violence and inequality” (Molina and Palmer 2005, 79). By the end of the last decade of the twentieth century, Costa Rica had accomplished “notable economic growth and significant developments in democratic processes and social justice” (79). The country boasts high rates of literacy (96%), life expectancy (79.0 years for both males and females), considerable access of the population to health services (87.5%) (Proyecto Estado de la Nación 2007), and a non-militarized democratic political régime. It has thus avoided the common problems of severe socioeconomic inequality and exclusion that have troubled many of its Latin American neighbors.⁴ According to the World Bank (2007), Costa Rica has one of the lowest poverty and social inequality rates in Latin America.

However, and in striking contrast to these claims, recent economic and social data by Proyecto Estado de la Nación⁵ (2007) indicate significant manifestations of social inequality within twenty-first century Costa Rican society. While economic growth and stability have been achieved, these indicators seem only loosely connected with the well-being of the population and the generation of employment. In fact, government spending on social development since 2003 has been reduced in favor of controlling fiscal deficit and achieving macroeconomic stability. It is not surprising, then, that even though the unemployment rate in Costa Rica in 2007 has been relatively low, and the poverty rate is less than half that of most Latin American neighbors (World Bank 2007), economic stagnation and poverty have been widespread for almost fifteen years (Barquero and Trejos 2004; Proyecto Estado de la Nación 2007). Of the approximately 40,000 students who drop out of secondary school every year, seven percent are forced to do so in order to enter the labour force to contribute to the income of their impoverished families. As the experts from the “State of the Nation Project” assert in their 2007 report, “poverty has been reduced, but we have not distanced the poor from poverty.”⁶

The process of impoverishment has been closely associated with a dramatic increase in crime and violence (Rico 2006; Proyecto Estado de la Nación 2007). In fact, local crime investigations correlate social inequality with the increase in the rates of both homicide and felony against property (Proyecto Estado de la Nación 2007). At the time this essay was prepared, the index of murder by robbery or assault duplicated that of the previous year. Almost half the population (49%) indicates insecurity in their immediate environment. (Proyecto Estado de la Nación 2007).

At beginning of the twenty-first century, it seems difficult to foresee a promising future: while “social differentiation increases significantly, a culture of classes is being consolidated” (Molina and Palmer 2005, 79). In the epilogue of their 2005 study on the transition of the Costa Rican society from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, these authors pose a simple, but crucial question: “Can peace be preserved within a context of increasing poverty and scarce social mobility opportunities?” (80).

POLITICAL AGENDA OF A CURRICULAR REFORM

While numerous government efforts in the economic and social realms over the last twenty-five years have been unable to reduce social inequality and its associated negative outcomes in Costa Rica, a recent program of curricular reform initiated by the Ministry of Public Education attempts to advance social change by positively influencing the learning and socialization processes of future citizens. This reform, called “Education in Arts, Ethical, and Citizen Values,” seeks to engage the secondary school population in learning and socialization practices in which knowledge is constructed by the students themselves through research, active engagement, reflection and criticism, and close interaction with their community. In keeping with its motto “To learn how to choose; to learn how to live together” (Garnier-Rímolo 2006),⁷ the reform seeks to promote dialogue, cooperation and negotiation as means to accomplish learning and socialization goals. It thus aims at educating citizens who are not only socially aware, but also able to make responsible individual and collective choices and engage in healthy social relationships. As Banks (1991) has put it, a curriculum that aspires to empower students

must be transformative in nature and help students to develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become social critics who can make reflective decisions and implement their decisions in effective personal, social, political, and economic action. (131)

In this regard, Giroux (1988) had already proposed that a critical curriculum should focus on democratic empowerment and provide a language of possibility, including

both basic skills for work and adult life and knowledge about the social forms through which human beings live, become conscious, and sustain themselves, particularly with respect to the social and political demands of democratic citizenship. (102)

The curricular reform addressed in this essay involves the so-called “soft” subjects in the public secondary school system (Grades 7 to 11): physical education, civic education, industrial arts, visual arts, home education, and music education. Such subjects, traditionally designated “recreational” or “non-academic,” are allotted either one or two forty-minute lessons per week. Despite being mandatory subjects, their status historically has been inferior to the “hard” subjects: Spanish, mathematics, social studies, sciences (physics, biology, and chemistry), computer science, and English-as-a-second language.

The Music Curriculum

The curriculum’s ultimate goal is to instill and develop self-knowledge, self-realization, criticism, and dialogue and negotiation skills through musically embodied agency.⁸ Musical engagement is thus regarded as a valuable vehicle for transforming the individual self, and through the self, the social order. In light of this political agenda, the music curriculum is not standards- or content-oriented, but *place*-oriented. Rather than a fixed, abstract, and objective “geographical place-time” duality, place is viewed a human phenomenon: “places through and in the lived experiences and interpretations of those who encounter them” (Pickles 1985, 17). Place is iteratively performed, made, and remade in social practice and can “affirm and re-affirm individual identity and social belongingness” (Cresswell 2002, 25). Since it is “both nexus and synthesis of space-time, action, and identity,” “[w]e ‘become’ through our actions, which occur in relation to others and ourselves in time-space contexts” (Stauffer 2009, 176).⁹ Furthermore, this curriculum does not view identity as a mere personality trait, but as an experience that involves both participation and reification. The process of being-in-the world needs reflexivity for creating a sense of inner self. The work of becoming becomes a learning process of incorporating “both past and future into the meaning of the present” (Wenger 1996, 163). Since we define who we are “by negotiating local ways of belonging to broader constellations and of manifesting broader styles and discourses,” identity must be regarded as

an interplay of local and the global (Wenger 1996). In these processes, “the issue of tensions and discords between what we are, what we think, how we perform” is likely to emerge (Lamb 1996, 125).

In accordance with its focus on place and its notion of identity, the curriculum pays close attention to the multiplicity of meanings of the musics in the lives of students (Elliott 1995), and to the unique and significant impact of sound and music upon individual and social processes of being in the world. Not only does the experience of sound contribute profoundly to our sense of being alive in the world, and affirm our bond with the world (Burrows 1990), “musical engagements put us in the world and in our bodies like nothing else does” (Bowman 2000, 6), challenging participants to make sense of who they are in relation to music (Stubley 1998). According to DeNora (2000), music is a key resource in the production of autobiography and the narrative thread of self, as a model of where one is, is going, or where one ‘ought’ to be emotionally. One can find one’s self in music’s ways of happening:

Music can be used as a device for the reflexive process of remembering/ constructing who one is To the extent that music is used in this way ... it is a device for the generation of future identity and action structures, a mediator of future existence. (63)

On the other hand, “musical meanings and values are fundamentally intersubjective affairs, and musics play important roles in creating and sustaining both individual and collective identity” (Bowman 2000, 7). The musical experience serves the communal, participatory, and communicative interests of a social human animal (Bowman 2000) and “is our last and best source of participatory consciousness” (Keil and Feld 1994, 20). Accordingly, Small (1997) states that the act of musicking establishes among those present a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act of musicking lies: relationships among the humanly organized sounds conventionally considered the stuff of music, but also relationships between person and person within the performance space (3–4).

Thus, collective musical engagements can potentially become the setting for revealing “one’s self and one’s relationship with others in a community” (Elliott 1995, 14). Such community relationships include all manner of contextual and contingent interactions, including personal, cultural, ethical, and moral matters. Musical practices thus have the potential to become “an on-going tuning process in which the self is experienced as an

identity in the making in that the self is defined by both who we are and who we are not” (Stubley 1998, 98).¹⁰

Turning our attention to the particular ways adolescent selves—the primary participants in this curriculum—are in the world *through* music, Costa Rican psychologist and researcher Rodríguez-Ramírez (2007) asserts, based on empirically corroborated findings, that adolescents establish within their everyday life contexts unique and intense relationships with music, relationships that enable them to cope efficiently with diverse personal developmental needs and social tasks. Her research findings in regard to Costa Rican adolescents suggest that through collective musical experiences, not only do adolescents deal more effectively with personal issues or challenges that usually involve pain, conflict, or uncertainty, they learn to interact in a considerably more fluid manner with their peers, developing mutual acceptance and establishing healthier relational bonds. It follows that music engagements can be envisioned as means to promote reflection on “how and why their bodies are behaving in habitual ways in particular circumstances of learning and ‘acting out’ in the world” (Elliott 2007, 10).

In consonance with these premises, musical experience may be conceived as a social space in which *music is what students are when they experience it*,¹¹ where *they become the music while it lasts*,¹² where *one finds the ‘me’ in the music*.¹³ It is a place or community where musical selves acquire a sense of “oneness”—a necessary condition to reach out to others’ “otherness”—and a realm where the frontier between the private and the public, the “internal” and “external”, becomes fluid and relative.

However, these social dynamics remain precarious unless they materialize into concrete transformative praxis involving responsibility, tolerance, dialogue, negotiation, and cooperation. According to Boff (2007), cooperative behavior is foundational in the progress of humankind, because it allowed “the leap from animalism into humanity.” According to this author, cooperation, solidarity and interdependence of one with others must be altogether a fundamental law in human life. The Costa Rican curriculum is interested in a very specific manifestation of these dynamics, one that is necessary for healthy social life: “[P]ersons who learn to speak with integrity and to hear others with openness and respect have gained the necessary skills to work for justice” (Kreisberg 1992, 14). This envisions a human being “capable of living, accepting, and constructing values unrelated to utilitarianism—such as

gratuity, love, friendship, and compassion—upon those who suffer”, a human being “who cares for our present and future life” (Boff 2007, 9). Such an individual will be better prepared to understand potential, social, political and cultural problems, and to engage in constructive social action.

CURRICULUM STRUCTURE

The curriculum is comprised of five years of mandatory general secondary music education in Grades 7 through 11. Music education is allotted two forty minute lessons per week in Grades 7 to 9, and one forty minute lesson in Grades 10 and 11. The course is divided in three terms in each grade. The curriculum is structured in twelve units.¹⁴ The names and general purpose of each unit, per grade, are outlined in table 1:

Table 1

Grade	Unit Name	Unit General Description and Purpose
Seventh	I. Let us improve the sonic environment in our homes, school, and community	Students will explore critically and actively sonorous phenomena in relation to their own bodies, as well as in their everyday life contexts. The aim is to develop awareness on both the roles of sounds in their personal, home, school, and community life, and the importance of making responsible and ethical decisions in regard to their use. As an outcome of this unit, students will design a preventative and corrective manual of sonic education for their school or community.
	II. Let us discover the musical secrets of ancient civilizations	Students will explore the possible soundscapes, contexts, musical practices and instruments in ancient Western and non-Western civilizations, including indigenous cultures from Costa Rica and Latin America. This will be preceded by reflection on the concepts “music,” “musics,” and “musicking.” The aim is to lead students to approach the musical meanings of diverse societies and cultures in an ethical way. The outcome of the unit will be an exhibition on the topic at the school or community.
	III. Let us enjoy and appreciate traditional Costa Rican music through our own concert	Students will engage with traditional Costa Rican music, to be performed at a concert at the school or community at the end of the unit.

Eighth	IV. Our musical “play-brary”	Students will explore their musical abilities and potentials through construction, play, and performance of diverse sonorous sources, toys, and instruments. At the end of the unit, a “play-brary” will be set up at the school or community.
	V. Let us make digital music	Students will explore and create music with digital media. At the end of the unit, students will disseminate their works on the world wide web. Special emphasis will be made on the ethical implications of intellectual property in regard to musical works.
	VI. In search of music that expresses our cultural identity	Students will explore the roots and diverse ethnic and global influences of Costa Rican contemporary musics. At the end of the unit, they will present concerts or lectures on the subject at the school or community, or other schools.
Ninth	VII. Our own concert with everyday musics	Students will plan, rehearse, perform, organize, and publicize their own concert, featuring their favorite musics, or works of their own, in their community. The concert must convey ethical and citizen values or messages, in both repertoire content and group work dynamics.
	VIII. Let us enjoy traditional music and dance from Latin America	Students will engage with traditional Latin American dances and music. The outcome will be a public performance in the community, or a local dance competition, fully organized by the students.
	IX. Let us compose a musical play on adolescent issues	Students will explore issues critical to adolescence, to be depicted or reflected upon through the staging of an interdisciplinary performance, involving music and other performing arts, to be fully organized by the students.
Tenth	X. Showcase of traditional Costa Rican music and culture	Students will explore diverse cultural manifestations of Costa Rica and establish their connections with music. The outcome will be a showcase of these manifestations, for the community.
	XI. We enjoy contemporary Costa Rican music	Students will interact with contemporary musics and musicians.
Eleventh	XII. Soundscape, Music, and musics in and for the community	Students will exercise activism in transforming their sonic environment by permeating their community with sounds and/or music, in connection with civil and community institutions and authorities.

Each unit opens with a brainstorming session involving artistic media, artifacts, and other accessible evidence of contents or topics pertinent to the unit's overall theme. In accordance with Sobel (1996, discussed in Stauffer 2009), place-conscious curriculum begins with the local, moves gradually out into the world, and examines the complexities of relationships of places. Brainstorming is followed by one or several discussion-and-reflection sessions which encourage inquiry, observation, and interaction within the school or the surrounding community. Such place-conscious practice is "experiential, multidisciplinary, collaborative, learner-centered, and constructivist" (Stauffer 2009, 178) and grounded in the "real and proximate, not abstract and remote" (Chin 2001, 19). This process is followed by group work that involves sharing, performing, and creating. These processes last a few weeks and may require independent work outside the classroom, after which students report to the teacher. Back at the school, performances, creations, or presentations are refined and reflected upon before being delivered to the school or the community. The purpose of this is to encourage students to understand and construct place "through actions, interactions, and relationships," because place is "always becoming—in process" (Cresswell 2002, 20).

Throughout the unit, several strategies may be followed to make connections with other curricular subjects with the intent of assuring a significant and global contribution to the community. This practice aims at encouraging students "to become more politically active and more involved with the larger community and thus effect changes within the larger community" (Oldenski 1997, 221). By developing a sense of community, students can also "begin to reach out to include other persons in the larger community"—students, parents, administrators (221).

An example of unit stages and associated educational practices is presented in the following section.¹⁵

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF THE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

The learning and assessment processes employed by this curriculum are intended to provide a collective space where students can explore, listen, and attest to their own and others' performances, through listening, performing, conducting, composing, arranging, and improvising. As Giroux puts it, the starting point for a critical curriculum is "the problems and needs of the students." This provides students "with a language through which they can

analyze their own lived relations and experiences in a manner that is both affirmative and critical” (Giroux 1988, 102–3, cited in Oldenski 1997, 85). Within this kind of engagement, a participant’s “awareness or understanding of another’s musicality, or of their musical goals in common, will inevitably be shaped by the identity work taking place in their conversations” (Oldenski 1997, 322). As Stubley observes, participants in musical engagements “bring a personal history of past musical and life experiences, which affects how they perform and relate to one another as the music making unfolds.” This becomes an experience of otherness “that creates ... an opportunity for individual musical identities to be asserted” (Stubley 1998, 96). Indeed, like conversation, music “is the exercise, in the moment, of a kind of practical knowledge, one that draws on everything that we are, even as it shapes who we are becoming” (Bowman 2000, 9). Music has the potential to configure, reconfigure and transfigure selves, modes of consciousness, and embodied capacities: a powerful means to mediate and reformulate embodied agency (DeNora 2000).

Within this curriculum, the teacher functions as a mediator. Experimentation with other artistic undertakings, such as body movement and dancing, acting, and directing, among others, is strongly encouraged, as these may enhance musical engagements. Through active learning practices, the curriculum aims to instill specific values critical to empowering students and transforming the larger social order. Such values are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Values	Educational Practices and Learning Experiences
<p>Self-Knowledge</p>	<p>Exploration of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Own vocal, aural, expressive and performance potential • Own identity and personality traits • Own physical and emotional sensations in relation to sound and music • Own subjectivity in solving musical challenges

Critical Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation of the sonorous phenomenon in diverse contexts and manifestations • Inquiry of “music” as a human practice reflecting the interests and development of human beings and society • Exploration and comparison of the multiplicity of musical meanings in diverse cultures and civilizations • Inquiry on socio-cultural influences on diverse musical manifestations • Inquiry on the contribution of diverse musics to culture and society • Critical comparison of diverse regional, national, and foreign musics • Analysis of diverse musical styles and genres • Exploration and assessment of techniques for performance • Critical reflecting on the performance of oneself and peers
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposal of own rationale for performing • Conducting performances • Proposal for technical and artistic problem solving • Creation of own works • Accomplishment of independent thinking and action
Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsible exploration and use of diverse media and techniques for performance • Responsible acceptance of both success and failure in individual and collective work • Embracing humility and critical reflection as values during self and peer assessment • Honest and transparent communication of thoughts and emotions during work
Respect for Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect for self potential and that of peers • Respectful analysis of surrounding cultural diversity • Respect for rationales, points of view, and arguments of peers
Solidarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration in satisfying needs of peers • Collaboration in pacific resolution of conflicts in team work
Creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciation of the recreational, communicative, and therapeutic potential of music • Appropriation of music as a means to construct the self and shape the social order • Exploration of a wide gamut of sonorous and musical phenomena • Exploration of visual, literary, and performing arts that contribute to music • Exploration of improvisation as a learning strategy • Appropriation of enjoyment • Appropriation of self-expression as an effective vehicle for self-realization

Table 3 outlines the main strategies within one unit of the curriculum. These strategies are offered as suggestions that teachers may adapt or expand in light of available time and resources, student potential, and specific learning needs.

Table 3

Outline of Educational and Assessment Processes, Unit IX, Ninth Grade
“Let Us Make Our Own Musical Work on Adolescent Issues”
PART ONE
Opening Stage: Inquiry Within the Community, Brainstorming and Discussion
<p>To begin the unit work, student groups are asked to collect photographs, visual art pieces or artifacts, literary works, recordings, costumes, or any other kind of material evidence of the economic, social, political, religious, and educational life of the Costa Rican society after obtaining its political independence from Spain, in 1821, and until the mid-twentieth century (the remaining period is to be approached in subsequent units). Each group presents their findings and then the class engages in discussion about the life in that specific period, after which students speculate on the musical practices throughout the period (for instance, military bands, liturgical music, school songs, dance salon music, among others). The teacher moderates the discussion. The teacher has already collected recorded examples of music within this period, introducing them to the students and inviting them to identify and describe the elements of music (studied in previous units) and their general interplay. Some general questions that may guide discussion are: How would you describe this music? How does it make us feel or what does it transmit to you? How is the melody? How can we describe this rhythm? What instruments can we identify? Responses are discussed.</p> <p>Discussion should move on to recalling the concepts “Music,” “musics,” and “musicking” (explored and learned at previous units) in order to address the media and social functions of the musics listened to. Some general questions to guide the discussion are: In what contexts were these musics listened to, sung, used, performed, or danced to? What people engaged with these musics and for what reasons?</p>
Second Stage: Group Work and Presentation/Exhibit
<p>After the last discussion session, student teams are asked to depict their responses and learned concepts through one of the following media: collage, painting, drawing, body sculpture, poetry, drama, among others. The entire class can also work on collectively making a conceptual map, which shows the context and main musical practices and their characteristics, during the period of study. Both conceptual map and tangible products from earlier activities can be presented to the school community at an exhibition and/or donated to the school library or media center. All these products must be presented and discussed in class, and also assessed with the aid of the corresponding assessment tables.</p>
Third Stage: Refining of Group Work
<p>Several strategies can be undertaken to refine group work:</p> <p>Each student group makes systematic inquiries through bibliographic and online sources (recommended in the curriculum document), about music genres, composers, ensembles, addressed at discussions. Inquiry may be supported by watching and discussing documentaries about the life of Costa Rica in the period of study, obtained through local networks or government archives and media centers. Students may also visit a local radio station to search for recordings of these musics. In addition, students can carry out a fundraising and donation campaign in order to purchase or collect many of these recording for the school library or music class. Resulting inquiries are shared and discussed in class.</p>

At a later session, the class should critically discuss and compare, through guided listening, music from the period of study and music from the present, their influences, and impact, and development over time. To this aim, holding a panel or debate on the topic is also possible. Live performances in class, by students themselves, or by guest local musicians are also encouraged. If there are chances of inviting community musicians, students should coordinate every aspect of the visit. If there is a guest musician whose contribution is deemed very significant to the class or school but is unable to visit the school, students may interview this person and record the interview on video for later discussion in class. Several musicians or bands could be approached by different student groups. Students could also attend a local concert or performance—concert band, popular music, local festivity—in order to observe musics, their context, role, use, social interactions, and impact. Groups should present their perceptions and conclusions through one of the following media: collage, painting, drawing, body sculpture, poetry, drama, among others. Tangible products must be presented, discussed, and also assessed with the aid of the corresponding assessment tables. They may be donated or shared with community agencies, such as the local municipality, or other schools.

PART TWO

Opening Stage: Brainstorming and Discussion, Group Work

The second part of the unit opens with a brainstorming session on adolescent issues and challenges (for example, related to self-esteem, peer-pressure, identity, gender, and sexuality), proposed by the students themselves. The teacher could show audio and video material to stimulate discussion, as well as press articles, photos, posters, or any other useful materials. At the end of discussion, each student group chooses one problem or issue to investigate. Findings ought to be depicted through one of the following media: collage, painting, drawing, body sculpture, poetry, drama, among others (see pictures 1, 2, and 3, below). Tangible products must be presented, discussed, and also assessed in class with the aid of the corresponding assessment tables. They should be kept for later use in the unit work.

Second Stage: Group Work Refining

In consultation with the teacher, student groups proceed either to choose musics they explored in the first part of the unit work or to compose works of their own that seem effective in addressing or representing the adolescent issues previously discussed. Students should propose an original performance of their own authorship, featuring music, dance, visual arts and drama, and even literature (see the first picture, next page). If the class is small, the entire group can work on one single performance. While live music performance is preferred, use of some recorded music is allowed where resources are very limited. Students decide who will take over specific roles: dancing, acting, playing, singing, directing, composing, staging, stage and prop construction (see the second picture, next page). Local artists may be invited to assist students at rehearsals and performances. Ideas on supporting strategies involving other subjects included in the curriculum document are highly recommended.

Third Stage: Presentation

In consultation with the teacher, students organize a public performance of their works at school, a community centre, or a regional festival. Students coordinate every technical aspect of the performance, including publicity. The tangible works produced at the end of the first part are displayed or used for the performance. The performance should be taped for further discussion and assessed with the aid of assessment tables.



A group of ninth graders in the pilot study phase work on a collage that expresses their concerns as adolescents. It clearly conveys concerns related to female sexuality, and in particular, how females are objectified in our society. The words “Sex” and “Women” are surrounded by the words “Injustice,” “Hope,” “Pain,” and “Childhood.” (Photograph property of M. Carballo-Murillo)



A group of ninth graders show their classmates their musical choreography reflecting what it means “to be adolescent.” Musics and musicking that are part of student life and identity often feature in the curriculum work. (Photograph property of M. Carballo-Murillo)

Critical reflection about performances and interactions are crucial during and after these practices. Students are guided in exploring, expressing, and sharing their reactions, perceptions, sensations, and emotions in regard to sounds and musics listened or danced to, performed, composed, or researched. Among the critical questions students are encouraged to ask about themselves, their performances, their environments, and their progress are those identified by Stauffer:

- What is my role and response as a musician?
- What changes can I make?
- Who can help?
- What do I need to learn?
- What is my role in this new ensemble?

(Stauffer 2009, 180)

The intent is that talking about musical engagements becomes a tool of social action, rather than a mere means of transmitting information, and that students achieve certain personal and social ends through their talk. Rather than talking about the world “out there,” students talk about their internal worlds of thought and motivations. Communication is thus regarded “as a system that is actively used to construct both the world and the self within dialogue” (MacDonald et al. 2005, 322).

Students discuss and reflect critically upon both creative processes and products, with the aim of encouraging criticism and a sense of the possible in each individual (Oldenski 1997). A major outcome of such critical endeavor, as Moraes puts it, is that “if students are able to critically interrogate their experiences and those of other students, they will be able to understand how social relations are historically shaped” by multiple discourses (Moraes 1992, 131).

While this curricular reform undertaken in Costa Rica makes no claim to be “the” way to overcoming social issues, it has been proposed as one sound, reasonable, and powerful response to a time of social crisis. Therefore, it is worth discussing how the curriculum envisions social crisis as an opportunity for advancing social awareness. As Boff (2007) observes: “When we are at crisis, we ask ourselves the most fundamental questions: who we are, where we come from, where we are going, what our place in the group of natural beings is, and what our mission in this world is” (3).

As hooks (1994) has written, transformation and reconstruction of selves begins at the very “historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one’s political circumstances” (47). Theology of liberation and critical pedagogy coincide in this aspect, as they both urge students to assume political roles and become agents of change: upon acknowledgement of unjust structures, individuals undertake to make their world “more caring and just, and thus eliminate or lessen that which oppresses or keeps the world from accommodating the individual and others in the same ‘state of existence’” (Oldenski 1997, 89). Furthermore, following Jorgensen (2003), those who are oppressed can “imaginatively envisage what might be otherwise possible, gain courage to transform their community and society toward achieving freedom, justice, and civility, and realize their creative powers to the fullest extent possible” (7). As DeNora (2000) has written, music “provides a fund of materials that serve as paradigms, metaphors, analogues, hints and

reminders of activity, practice and social procedure,” and may therefore serve “as a resource for utopian imaginations, for alternate worlds and institutions [and] to presage new worlds” (159).

However, social change is unlikely if participants do not develop the capacity to listen carefully and critically. Levin (1989) warns that “our very limited development of a capacity for listening is responsible for much suffering and misery” (3). Clear and powerful transformative potential can be found in the capacity to listen:

The cultivation of this capacity can contribute to and be affected by the forming of moral character, encouraging communicative relationships, awakening a compassionate sensibility and the understanding it bears within it, motivating a concern for reciprocity and respect for differences (Levin 1989, 3).

PROVISIONS FOR CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

Although the primary concern of this article is to show what this curriculum model involves and why, also noteworthy are the circumstances leading to its endorsement and implementation by the Costa Rican government. In its pilot study phase, sixteen randomly-chosen secondary public music teachers underwent full-time, two-week training on the philosophy and methodology of the curriculum, with the intent of implementing a complete unit of the curriculum program. Class observations, feedback, and interviews with students, teachers, principals, parents, and community members were conducted by a team of experts from the Ministry of Public Education, assisted by the author. Results showed that most teachers required a more solid preparation in the philosophy and methods of the curriculum. They also suggested the need for more concrete strategies for motivating students. Initial speculations on the potential causes for these problems identified two primary areas of concern: (1) Many of the teachers had neither studies in education nor degrees in music education—that is, they were performers drawn to teaching as source of income; (2) University music teacher training programs are not conversant in the philosophical orientations that inform this curriculum. On further investigation it was concluded that the most significant impediments were dogmatic, indoctrinative approaches to teaching: approaches that failed to account for or accommodate differing student backgrounds and needs. As Stauffer warns, practitioners need to consider critical questions about their students, such as:

- Who are these learners?

- Where do they come from?
- Where are they socially and psychologically?
- What are the musical practices of their communities?
- Where, when, and with whom do they make music or listen to music?
- What do they do? How do they learn music?
- What can music instruction offer them individually? Collectively?

(Stauffer 2009, 182)

Upon request of the Ministry of Public Education a new training model was proposed by Rosabal-Coto (2008) taking into account the pilot study findings, and with the supervision and financial support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). This training model was implemented in March 2009 and delivered to a group of twenty-six leaders in music education, each of them outstanding music educators, drawn from all the school districts in the country and from all Costa Rican universities granting music education degrees. Each participant had at least a Licentiate degree in music education, considerable teaching experience, and a reputation for effective and innovative teaching. Participants were selected with the intent that they would assume responsibility for training other teachers throughout the country.

Training involved the participants in intense, practical experiences designed to instill a feel for the experiences students undergo. It also addressed methodological and assessment issues that became evident in the pilot study. Shortly after these training sessions, these teachers carried out similar training sessions with all secondary public school teachers in their respective school districts.¹⁶ At the time of this writing, the Costa Rican government had committed to provide further training to teachers.



At the March 2009 training session, secondary music teachers were guided into musicking in a variety of styles, using the available media. Many teachers work at schools with very few available instruments and scant resources—especially in suburban and rural areas. Many even lack access to a music classroom. (Photograph property of the author)



After exploring baroque music contexts and practices in Europe and the American continent, a group of teachers, wearing costumes made themselves, performs a baroque-style piece of their own composition featuring the Costa Rican folk marimba. (Photograph property of the author)



The teachers after the closing of their March training session. The Minister of Education, who has encouraged and followed-up every stage of the curricular reform, is seated fourth from the left in the third row. The author of this article, and training facilitator, sits second in the first row. (Photograph property of the author)

Suggestions for Future Work

Contingent or preliminary though this curriculum model may appear, it aims to make the schooling process both meaningful and critical, and in doing so, to make it emancipatory (Giroux 1988). The curriculum encourages students to examine who they are, how, and why, within a lived musical space where personal interactions and musical engagements acquire significant intensity. By sharing *place* in and through music, students engage in the active creation of individual and collective realities. As a critical curriculum, its goal is to empower students “to intervene in their own self-formation and to transform the oppressive features of the wider society that make such an intervention necessary” (Giroux 1988, xi).

Music education scholarship is increasingly concerned with establishing more democratic educational approaches that offer to reconnect individuals, schools, and communities. The success of such efforts will depend on critical dialogue among

philosophers, policy makers, administrators, and school music practitioners—and on efforts to develop curricular agendas that are place-oriented, confronting sociocultural and political concerns. In order to advance social awareness through music practices it is essential to redefine the role of music education practitioners, exploring how both music school curricula and teacher preparation programs may be more transformative and responsive to the lived realities of both students and communities. Such efforts involve rewriting “the relationship among cultural and pedagogical production as part of a broader vision that extends the principles and practices of human dignity, liberty, and social justice” (Giroux 1993, 79).

Lastly, for many other developing nations like Costa Rica, the time is ripe to place arts education at the forefront of efforts to encourage social awareness and advance social justice. As both critical pedagogy and liberation theology advocate, critical education should help students “develop both a language of critique and a language of possibility about their own living situations” (Oldenski 1997, 217).

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Notes

¹ At the time this essay was prepared, the curriculum was in its initial implementation phase. Therefore, the specifics of implementation over time warrant a later study or critique.

² Information on the structure, policies, and work of the Ministry of Public Education of Costa Rica are available at: <http://www.mep.go.cr/>

³ There is also a wide offering of instrumental and ensemble instruction for children, adolescents, and adults, available through programs set up by joint efforts and funding from

the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, citizen associations, and municipalities. These are not related to school music.

⁴ As a result of its economic development since the 19th century, Costa Rica has not had an abundant labor force of indigenous or other proletariat for being taxed, put in debt, and ultimately exploited.

⁵ The *Proyecto Estado de la Nación*, or “State of the Nation Project”, is a publication issued every year by the “State of the Nation Program” (*Programa Estado de la Nación*), a research and education agency on sustainable human development whose main goal is to monitor and assess the development of the Costa Rican society. This agency is sponsored by the four public universities and the Citizen Defender Council of Costa Rica. Given its breadth and comprehensiveness, this publication is authoritative on matters of economic and social development.

⁶ According to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), “poverty constitutes the extreme form of exclusion of individuals and families from the productive processes, social integration, and access to opportunities ... in its two-folded dimension of low income and lack of satisfaction of basic needs.” In this view, social exclusion manifests itself in at least three crucial dimensions of poverty: a) economic, in terms of material deprivation and access to markets and services that guarantee basic needs, b) political and institutional, in regard to the lack of civil and political right that guarantee civil participation, and c) socio-cultural, in relation to the lack of knowledge of gender, generational, ethnic, religious, and social group identities (Garcitúa and Shelton 2000, 14–5).

⁷ Leonardo Garnier-Rímolo was the Minister of Public Education of Costa Rica at the time of the curricular reform.

⁸ See Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica (2008).

⁹ For a rich discussion on *place* curriculum and music education, see Stauffer, S. “Placing” curriculum in music. In Regelski, T. and T. Gates (Eds.). (2009). *Music Education for Changing Times: Guiding Visions for Practice*. Netherlands: Springer.

¹⁰ According to Stubley, a symbiotic tuning is carried out between and among body, mind, instrument, sound, and the musical actions of other participants (98–9).

¹¹ The author paraphrases Clifton (1983) “Music is what I am when I experience it”, from *Music as heard*. Italics by the author.

¹² The author paraphrases Eliot (1988) “Music is what I am while the music lasts”, from “Dry Salvages” in *Four Quartets*. Italics by the author.

¹³ The author paraphrases DeNora (2000, 68). Italics by the author.

¹⁴ Since the school year consists of three trimesters, this division is practical.

¹⁵ Since an exhaustive account of curriculum content is not the purpose of this essay, it is not addressed in detail here. Content areas include learning and performance of the elements of music and a variety of musics, music history and practices in Western and non-Western cultures, sight-reading and music writing, and basics of sonic education, among others. Specific contents may be consulted in each unit, and are also outlined on pages 43–7 in the curriculum document, referenced at the end of the article.

¹⁶ There are 23 school districts in the country, encompassing about five hundred secondary public schools.

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