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Repositioning ‘The Elements’: How Students Talk about Music

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Repositioning ‘The Elements’: How Students Talk about Music



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Several years ago, we relocated our work as educators from middle and high school music classrooms to positions in teacher education at two Canadian universities. Recognizing that working in initial teacher education demanded a new level of theorizing our practices of music education, we questioned our professional knowledge, developed courses, and found solace and inspiration in collaboration as we considered the literature demanding a paradigm shift in music education.¹ We pondered the gap between the ideas expressed in this literature and the classroom realities that many of our teacher candidates were experiencing. Along with other trends, we noticed that many of our teacher candidates were being asked by their associate teachers² to teach “a lesson or two on *the elements* of music”. This happened often enough that we began to explore why we felt troubled by the request, how we had ourselves approached the curriculum expectation to teach *the elements*,³ and what we were doing to assist our teacher candidates to interrogate official curricula.

In this article, we draw on our experiences as both K-12 music teachers and teacher educators to:

1. share our thinking about the continuing curricular ubiquity of *the elements of music*
2. highlight how *the elements* work as a framework of dominance, denying diversity, access, and individual agency
3. articulate barriers to change toward an enactment of an alternative pedagogy
4. identify ways our adolescent students responded to and communicated about music and suggest implications and alternatives for pedagogy related to music listening.

Part One

The elements and music curricula

Ubiquity of *the elements* in music curricula

The elements of music have become a foundational curricular component of music education. We trace their entrenchment to the North American curriculum reforms of the 1950s, heightened by the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957. Political pressures demanded that education achieve higher academic standards, especially in mathematics and sciences. Bruner (1960) explained his *structure of the disciplines* theory and envisioned a spiral curriculum built from each discipline's conceptually fundamental ideas. The influential *Basic Concepts in Music Education* (1958), which "set the agenda for future intellectual developments in music education" (Mark 1996, 59) includes discussion of music's "constituent elements." A short excerpt is instructive.

Children come to realize that a piece of music is more satisfying, both to hear and to perform, if its rhythmic organization, its key relationships, its phrase structure, and its melodic and harmonic textures are firmly and clearly grasped. It is in and through this progressive awareness of constituent elements that the pattern itself, as a totality, becomes more articulated, more significant, more adequately appreciated. Such is the process of musical growth. (Mursell 1958, 150)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to trace the evolution from Mursell's discussion of constituent elements to the fixed official lists that authoritatively reappear in music education text books, Internet sites, government curricula and commercially produced resources.

Examples of these lists of *the elements of music* include

- Pitch, rhythm, harmony, dynamics, timbre, texture and form (National Association for Music Education website)
- Rhythm, pitch, harmony, form, timbre, texture, and expressive qualities— dynamics, tempo, articulation (Ontario Ministry of Education 2009)
- Melody, rhythm, harmony, texture, timbre, dynamics, form, word-music relationships and genre (Bonds 2009)

It is instructive to revisit such music curricula initiatives as the *Manhattanville Music Curriculum Program* (MMCP, 1965) and the *Contemporary Music Project* (CMP, 1959-1973) to confirm that *the elements* were once considered as *one* analytical tool within an open-ended, creative, student-centred approach to music learning (Mark 1996, 152).

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Somehow *the elements* came to be treated as verbalizable objects of knowledge, decoupled from a vision of music education as a search for personal meaning in music through critical thinking and problem solving.

Elliott (1995) notes that “the structure-of-disciplines approach to curriculum making... was based on the assumption that every subject has a foundational pattern of verbal concepts that, when understood by teachers and students, enables all other aspects of that subject domain to fall into place” (244). He articulates our understanding that this technical-rational approach to music curriculum

- assumes that “knowing is different from doing” (245)
- controls teachers, framing them as deliverers of objective, non-negotiable truths
- maintains the Cartesian hierarchy of mind and body.

Unfortunately, as a result of their ubiquitous curricular presence *the elements* are too often taken as truth, the preeminent framework for exploring and understanding music.

Academicking to conform to pedagogies of schooling

We coin the term *academicking* to describe how music educators make pedagogical decisions that morph a naturally holistic, non-languaged content area into one that mimics pedagogies from “academic” courses. We are concerned about what is lost when curricular imperatives pressure music teachers to academicize music making and we observe that *the elements* framework seems to invite this treatment: rigid definitions to learn and precise verbal discriminations to make, followed by written tests to measure the degree to which the set knowledge is acquired. Music knowledge is presented as atomistic, static and transmittable—yet students *know* that music is personal, emotional, physical, unnameable,⁴ complex, connected and enormously diverse. The teacher-centered pedagogy that *the elements* has traditionally encouraged denies that students are already musickers capable of constructing their own understandings, framing their own questions and collectively shaping language to communicate these understandings and questions.

This tendency to academicize, to teaching (the non-performance aspects of) music in ways that uphold a transmissive vision of schooling, emphasizes conformity and denies subjectivity, emotion, uncertainty and the importance of human relationships. With particular reference to secondary school students, we note that the shift to academicking ignores

“pleasure, desire and the complex ways in which youth consume and produce media” (Gaztambide-Fernández 2011).

To understand this propensity to academicize we must acknowledge the traditional caste system of school subjects, a system in which some content areas are valued more than others.⁵ In this hierarchy, disciplines based on objectivity and empirical proofs are valued above disciplines based on knowing in the body and knowing-in-doing.⁶ We believe this inclination to academicking in music teaching is one result of music education’s perennially marginal status and the resulting need to be legitimized, valued, respected, and funded.

Naming *the elements* as a framework of dominance

Part of our intent in this paper is to name *the elements* as a dominant culture framework, an unquestioned, Eurocentric way of thinking about music, emerging from a position of privilege and power. In our view the traditional *pedagogy of the elements* is an oppressive pedagogy, which devalues diversity, limits access, and denies individuality. By outlining the disadvantages and limitations of this ubiquitous framework and by offering alternatives, we encourage our teacher candidates to consider *the elements* as just one of many frameworks that could be used to talk about music.

First, *the elements* raise issues of value, diversity, and representation. The notion of *the elements* emerged in music education during a time when music curricula in North America were based on the traditions of European art music (Taylor 2007). *The elements* developed as the unit of analysis to help uncover *the greatness* of these works of art. In contrast, the counting songs of childhood and the garage and air bands of adolescents’ everyday musical lives suffer from the devaluing effect of the familiar, the common, the conventional. *The elements* framework is implicated in maintaining a hierarchy of value which marginalizes and excludes.

The pedagogy of *the elements* often positions some musics as *other*, outside the canon. The language of *the elements* is not the language of jazz, Hindustani vocal music, rap, or traditional fiddling. This process of *othering* is typical in music textbooks: the canon is reviewed, and a special section is created for, say, “Women in Music” or a chapter is added for world music or popular music. Sometimes popular music is situated as a palatable way into the real work of music education: from Beatles to Beethoven – *a spoonful of sugar*

makes the medicine go down. Dichotomies – legit and non-legitimate, academic and popular, art and commercial – perpetuate the tendency to academicking.

In our years of working and learning with students in our school classrooms (and in our homes and community groups) we came to recognize the complexity of adolescents' musical responses, and to worry about the ways that *the elements* simplify and essentialize musical experiences and ideas. Using *the elements of music* as a framework to approach, for example, mbira music of the Shona (Zimbabwe) or the art rock of *Rush* often causes teachers to extract simple analyses that over-generalize, essentialize and fall short of providing anything that deepens the lived experience of participating in and understanding these musics, ourselves, and our worlds.

Teachers' decisions about which repertoire "should" be explored in music class are influenced by pervasive discourses of high and low art that are part of the university preparation. The comfort of certainty and precision that *the elements* affords is hard to resist. While we recognize the usefulness of *the elements framework* in specific contexts we seek to change the commanding influence this framework exerts over curriculum and pedagogy. We wish to include space for other frameworks for analyzing music, and we acknowledge the work of Tait and Haack (1984), Cutietta (1993), and Swanwick (1999) in this regard. We also contend that students can generate their own robust analytical frameworks, a position that we take up later in this paper.

Second, the singular framework raises issues of access. Central to questioning the music education paradigm (Bartel 2004) is the issue of who is participating in school music. In his double cohort study of Ontario secondary schools King (2004) reports that 5.7% of students enrol in Grade 12 music. This statistic is troubling given that adolescents report that listening to music is their favorite activity (Boal-Palheiros and Hargreaves 2001; North et al. 2000; Roberts, Henriksen, and Foehr 2004; Zillman and Gan 1997). Music is omnipresent in the life of teens (Campbell, Connell, and Beegle 2007) and affects their moods, dictates their fashions, influences their language and dominates their conversations, defining what and who is cool. Yet few music education programs, in our experience, engage students in critical conversations about the role of music in their lives.

The disconnect between school music and music in the everyday lives of students continues to be addressed by various music education scholars (e.g. Regelski and Gates 2009,

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Wright 2010, Green 2008). Johnson (2009) addresses the “bizarre misfit” (18) between the classical skills and conventions taught, often exclusively, in music education institutions and the “real worlds of music”. This misfit helps explain the small percentage of students who are involved in their high school music programs in North America. Pedagogies and repertoires typically affiliated with “the rehearsal model”—with what Johnson calls the three R’s of musicianship and music education: repeat, re-enact and re-experience—exclude many students who lack the advantages of notational musical literacy, often acquired through private tuition. Further, the musical passions that enrich many students’ lives, such as garage band jamming, electronic mixing, or intense listening to specific contemporary genres are usually not evident in our secondary school programs, confirming for these students that they do not belong, that they are not musical in the sanctioned sense of the word. The ethos of the concert hall, music’s equivalent to the ivory tower, limits access, and makes it a herculean task for teachers to develop programs based on students’ prior experiences and real world knowledges.

Our third area of concern is related to the ways that *the elements* framework dictate how students are supposed to experience music and related issues of student agency. *The elements* framework oppresses when it

- demands conformity to a particular way to listen and respond
- negates personal ways of experiencing and knowing, stifling how adolescents really engage with music
- denies the important work of identity and community development.

The elements entrench the concept of music as an object “where composing, performing and listening take place in a social vacuum” (Small 1998, 6). With a focus on *the elements* in the curriculum, it is easy to forget to explore our relationships with music, the relationships created through the complex dance among sound, composer, performer, listener and context. To focus on student agency in music class is to focus less on the music itself and more on our relationships with music and to ask how we create opportunities for adolescents to speak their truths.

Recognizing issues of diversity, access and individual agency, we suggest that an ongoing interrogation of power and bias is necessary to uncover the equity issues implicit in the teaching of *the elements*. To challenge oppressive hidden curricula we urge teachers to

critique their repertoire choices and analytical frameworks, both in discussions with professional peers and with their students. Naming and discussing with students the issues that surround repertoire choice is a powerful teaching move. *Who decides which musics are valued? Does the educational system promote Eurocentrism? How do we achieve musical inclusion without tokenism?* In our experience students are thrilled to be let in on the complexities surrounding educational choices and decisions.

Barriers to Change to Enact Alternative Practices

Implementing alternatives is the hard work of activism. Questions about what should be taught are negotiated by teachers every day as they interrogate *the* curriculum, the experiences and skills they bring to the work and the professional pressures that influence their practice. Music teacher candidates, in their liminal positions, must negotiate tensions and contradictions among associate teachers' requests, official curriculum expectations, their own ideas about music education, and the research-based curricular/pedagogical experiences and critiques they encounter in their professional preparation.

Even with very experienced teachers, self-doubt seeps into questions of professional identity, as the following excerpt from one of our research interviews indicate.

Kailee: The band loves to play music from movies...they loved and performed with passion music from *Gladiator* and *Lord of the Rings*. They worked hard and were so proud of their accomplishments. But am I putting the ensemble and my professional identity at risk, if we perform pieces like these at the music festival – even though the measures in 5/4 time and key signatures of 4 sharps offer great challenge? Last year we played *Hockey Night in Canada* - and received accolades in the national contest for our interpretation of it, but were frowned upon at a band festival, because we were performing music more closely related to pop culture (and not Holst or Vaughan Williams). I worried that we might be disqualified! (research notes, LSR, 2008)

Another of our school partners explains how risky it feels to teach music differently, to change the status quo.

Marie: So you want to get together with other music teachers for sharing, but then you have to be careful, you're on guard while you're sharing – I know I am. I'm on guard. I've got to be careful of what I say to other teachers about what I'm doing in

my teaching. I need to be careful not to go too far off the norm. But with my kids, in my music room, I feel totally free to experiment. (research notes, JC, 2010)

We recognize how difficult it is to resist the reproduction of oppressive pedagogies and how easy it is to teach the body of knowledge that is deemed worthy by voices of authority or that reflects the perceived (and received) norm. The influence of an *apprenticeship of observation* (Lortie 1975) from 17 years of schooling, and the dominant culture, rehearsal model nature of conservatory and university music programs, coupled with the authority of elements-based government curricula and commercial resources all play a role in status quo practice. An examination of these issues can provide a context to trouble the role of *the elements* framework.

Our teacher candidates struggle to enact alternative pedagogy, despite their engagement with this intellectual work and exposure to alternative role models. We engage the moral imperative of equity/anti-oppression work as an impetus for change. In our teacher education classrooms, we promote and strive to model inquiry-based learning and student-centered pedagogies that build on student knowledge. “*But just teach us how to teach music!*” some teacher candidates implore us, not grasping that they are asking to be *trained* to teach a traditional music education curriculum which maintains all power with the teacher and which advantages an already advantaged social group. Such comments imply a desire for status-quo teaching and a denial of teachers’ moral obligations within value-laden curricula. “*What does social class or anti-racism have to do with teaching in music classrooms?*” “*What does the history of ethics behind The Huron Carol have to do with me?*” “*What is problematic about Black History month?*” “*Who is Drake?*”

As we raise questions of power and authority, access and privilege, representation and value, it becomes clearer that these issues have everything to do with music education. One of the ways to disrupt oppressive and inequitable practice is to question the dominant culture bias inherent in any singular approach or perspective, including the ubiquitous and unquestioned *elements of music*. Thus, central to our work as teacher educators is helping teacher candidates examine the ways that their life histories and social identities position their beliefs, purposes, strengths, and assumptions, and in turn, influence their teaching practice.

As teacher educators working within a paradigm shift we struggle with tensions of preparing teacher candidates for the current world and a more equitable future. In order for

change to happen, we all need to work in uncertainty and discomfort, open to criticism. We believe that encouraging teacher candidates to question received models of teaching, to embrace ambiguity, and to resist the simplistic notion of “best practice” prepares them to teach in our complex, fast changing, globalized world.

By examining bias and dominance in *the pedagogy of the elements* we see that traditional *elements* curricula regulate what to listen to, how to listen to it, how to respond to it and how to share it. By developing and using alternate frameworks for listening we feel we are making one small, yet significant move that more equitably serves all students in our schools. Many others have been critical of the oppressive processes in schooling⁷. It is important in this context to note the irony of the process of academicking music, a school subject that naturally relates to students lives, interests, and current societal issues and that taps into the joys of being alive.

From Our Classrooms: Practitioner Research

The idea of practitioner research is theorized by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) through their construct of *inquiry as stance*, which includes an expanded view of practice and of practitioner. Cochran-Smith and Lytle employ *practitioner research* or *practitioner inquiry* as an umbrella term encompassing such research genres as self-study, the scholarship of teaching and participatory action research, each of which involves the researcher as a practitioner engaged in inquiry for the purpose of enriching student learning and contributing new knowledge about pedagogy. The ultimate goals of practitioner research are educational and social change.

This vision of practitioner research resonates strongly for us. As teacher educators we have worked together to probe the synergies among our K-12 music teaching practices, our theoretical understandings and confusions about teaching and music and music teaching and learning and our evolving ideas about how best to mentor our music education students/teacher candidates. From the beginning of our collaboration we often told each other stories of our past and current practice, and came to recognize this shared story-telling as a necessary process of meaning-making for us.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle note the power of the data collected from the emic perspective, where the researchers’ own “questions, interpretative frameworks, changes in

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views over time, dilemmas and recurring themes” (44) constitute the data. They also confirm that data and interpretation blur in practitioner research, especially in situations, like ours, where we make our professional work “a strategic site for inquiry” (43). In doing this work we pose “real problems of practice” (151). In probing how we negotiated the curriculum expectation to teach *the elements* in our own practices we work toward “a grounded theory of action for the transformation of teaching, learning and leading.”(150-151).

Part Two

How students talk about music using *their* ‘elements’

We were continually struck by the similarities between our recollections of our students’ responses during listening experiences. The student quotes in the following sections are recreated from vivid memories of listening experiences from both of our high school music classes.

We believe that listening to musics of various styles and cultural practices is a vital part of school music education when it leads to deeper experiences, relationships and understandings of and among music, ourselves, and the world around us. If we bypass the limiting and misleading curricular imperative which centers listening around analysis of *the elements*, if we move away from unidirectional study through which meaning is derived *from* the music as a static “work of art,” and if we recognize the listeners’ interpretive rights, what alternate frameworks might we adopt?

Through sharing many stories of our own journey of learning to teach in our school music classrooms, we recognized that our disillusionment with *the elements* framework had led us, gradually, to develop pedagogical moves that honoured students’ musical knowledge, needs, and passions. Our adolescent students’ conversations about music were revelatory once we stopped to listen. From our years of witnessing and sharing in these conversations, we coalesce into themes some of the ways our students engaged with music:

1. Students talked about *what* they heard, in complex ways.
2. Students explored *how* they built relationships with the sound and with each other.

3. Students indicated their need to examine the power and the mystery of musical experiences in their lives.

We have come to think of these talking points as our students' own robust elements of music. As opposed to an atomistic, detached approach to listening, adolescents relish music's holistic nature and its sensual base. It is richly ironic that adolescents hear music in more complex ways than the curriculum suggests they should. We believe that *the elements* framework causes teachers to try to over-simplify a complex temporal phenomenon, and thus interfere with the richness of the listening experiences.⁸

I. What the students heard: The sound relationships

The recurring musical components that our students noticed and described were never simple identifications of, for example, duple and triple feel or disjunct or conjunct melodies. Rather, students addressed complexities of musical relationships. Where *the elements* seek to simplify, to discriminate and categorize, our students seek to relate, create, play, and celebrate. The following talking points were consistently center of attention in their conversations about what they heard.

Groove. Students use the term *groove* to describe the energy resulting from complex interactions among rhythm, harmonic pull and direction, and articulations. The ways our students engaged with the music through their bodies made explicit their understandings of the complexity and effectiveness of a “groove,” hugely influenced by their own favourite musics. Music with strongly marked rhythm “grooved,” of course, but their notion of groove was broader: the opening of Victor Wooten’s *Amazing Grace* bass solo for example, so slow and meditative, was described as having a “chill groove” moving to “a wicked groove” that “kicks”; the richness of the fundamental tone and the “floaty” effect of the overtones of Tibetan Buddhist Monks chant was explained as “having an awesome groove” by some students, indicating a looseness and stretchiness in the application of verbal labels for musical events.

Delicious timbres. Students described the sensuous qualities of enticing timbres, often with rich metaphoric language. When listening to *Earth, Wind & Fire* or *Fanfare for the Common Man*, for example, they described the “wall of sound,” and the “knock-you-over brass section”. Some students delighted in very specific timbral preferences: “I love her voice

when she's at the top of her range"; "ah, he detunes the bottom string right there"; "when they add reverb, here, listen . . . that's my favourite part." Others displayed sophisticated knowledge and fine-grained discrimination skill, commenting on the sounds and effects of a Stratocaster, a Les Paul or a Fender, and musing at the brand names and capacities of the guitars employed by a particular band.

Delight in patterns of sound. Our students' expressed attention to musical patterning aligns with our understanding of work in neuroscience that explains the phenomenon known as habituation (Jourdain 1997). Listeners find comfort in repetition, yet our brains attend to change and difference. A highly skilled analysis is required to perceive current inputs, compare against prior experiences which form understandings of musical "devices" and anticipate the next musical move, based on an informed cognitive guess. This process of building understanding of musical patterns begins at birth and is specific to the musical environment of each individual. Our students displayed their deep understandings of musical patterning in multiple ways. They lifted memorable riffs (melodic hooks, repetitive bass line patterns), both during and after the listening – singing overlapping motives from Reich's *Different Trains*, for example, ("crack train from New York, from New York . . .") or scatting funk bass licks. They laughed at the twists and turns of music that plays with our anticipations, and delighted in such processes as extended chromatic rising sequences, exclaiming "how much farther can he take that!?"

II. How students built relationships with sound and with each other: Sharing the experience of listening

Students built relationships with sound and with each other. Sharing the experience of listening was of great importance. Entwined in the conversations about what they heard were expressions of their personal engagement with the music. The talk and musical activity related to discussions of how they experienced listening consisted of a wide and idiosyncratic and richly multimodal range of verbalizations and physical gestures and movements. We call attention to the pleasure many of our students took in sharing with their peers their personal reactions to and impressions of music during and following a group listening event.

We ascribe to the sociocultural learning perspective that collaborative talk is "not just a stimulant for individual thinking, but can itself be considered a social form of thinking"

(Mercer and Littleton 2007, cited in Pramling and Wallerstedt 2009). We repeatedly witnessed this phenomenon of collaborative talk in our high school classrooms: students constructed understandings as they publicly shared their personal observations, insights and judgments. They seemed to build a group sense of the music's workings.

Students had varying degrees of comfort in contributing to this collaborative conversation, of course, but we observed in our classrooms an intense focus when we got out of the way and students shared with each other their impressions of a common listening experience. Sometimes a student would invent a physical metaphor (walking against the wind) or a visual metaphor (that moment when the sun is just sinking); or would create a visual representation (I painted this to show . . .) to capture the effect of a passage, and another student would exclaim "oh, wow, exactly." There is a sense of intimacy and of affirmation created when a person shares his/her personal, bodily, musical response with others. Adolescents long for such glimpses of intimacy, and sharing them allows students the possibility of being "authentically present to one another" (Greene 1988, 16).

These verbal metaphors, physical movements, gestures, visual representations, and vocalizations – what were they indicating about our students' experiencing of music? We articulate several ideas here, reiterating that adolescents' responses to and discussions about musical experiences are situated, communal and synergistic.

Gestures reflecting reaction to fulfilled denied or delayed expectations. Quirky smiles, wide-eyed surprise and spontaneous laughter in our classrooms were ways our students communicated their enjoyment of the playfulness, trickery, and cleverness of musical creators. Our students reminded us that music is an experience where patterns are set up, anticipation is whetted, and the composer or improviser or performer "plays" with the listener by fulfilling, denying or delaying expectations. Laughter seemed to be an indicator of strong anticipation set up by a convention or device and followed by a violation of "the rules." We are caught in the trap and we laugh at ourselves! An example of this interruption of anticipation is exemplified when a jazz pianist deploys a nursery rhythm near the end of a complex improvised solo, before returning to the head. We know that our students are communicating their knowledge of music, when they physically entrain to the beat, erupt in dance or "conduct" the music. Watching students' unsolicited movements seems to us to be one way into understanding students' anticipatory experiences.

Of our students' varied responses to listening, physical gestures were paramount. These gestures both gave expression to what they were hearing and helped them connect with their peers. These physical gestures enriched, and sometimes replaced, verbal descriptions. Indeed, we wonder if adolescents perhaps grasp the inseparability of body and mind in musicking, what Bowman (2009) calls "the mind-body continuum," more easily than do their music teachers.

In awe: when expectations of "what is possible" are exceeded. We articulate what we repeatedly witnessed as one of the most spontaneously joyous responses to specific listening events: talk that attempted to capture the awe we feel when our expectations of "what is possible" are exceeded. Students' comments on "amazing", "unbelievable" (Kurt Elling's scatting), "awe-some" musical performances were punctuated with props or high-fives (Jay-Z's rapping), air-performing (Eddie Van Halen's soloing) and vocables of delight. This sense of awe when experiencing virtuosity (John Mayer's guitar playing; Ben Heppner singing *Nessun dorma*), creative ingenuity (Bjork), and superb expressivity (Sweet Honey in the Rock) was palpable. Our students revelled in what they perceived as beyond normal human limits. We recognize their "oohs and aahs" and head shaking (Huun Huur Tu's multiphonic singing), their sometimes dumb-founded silence (Barber's *Adagio*) and their cheers of affirmation (Arturo Sandoval's improvised solos), as moments of shared participation in human excellence. Our students wanted to hear these pieces again and again: we believe they were celebrating human possibility.

III. The need to explore the power and mystery of the musical experience in their lives

Once we learned how to open the doors to more student-directed learning, we found that students craved opportunities to explore the roles that music played in their lives. They wanted to ponder such phenomena as

- why recalling old lullabies and childhood songs feels comforting
- how music can trigger memories and cause us to make associations
- how music can suggest particular colours and images, often unique to each listener
- why some tunes are catchy or drive us crazy when they become incessant "earworms" (Sacks 2007) that invade our inner hearing for days
- why some music induces physical sensations, like a "shiver" down the spine

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- how some music is capable of altering our sense of energy, pumping us up while getting ready for a party, or calming us down before sleep
- why sad songs make us feel good, especially when we are sad
- how musicians use their artistry for social consciousness

Students pushed us to think about music not as a thing, but an activity. Embracing the mysteries, acknowledging the richness of human experiences and their fundamentally bodily basis addresses what many adolescents find most compelling about performing, creating and listening to music. It seems that the body, so integral to musical engagement, is an elephant in the music classroom. Ironically, what we value most about music in our personal lives we are socialized to avoid in our classroom lives.

Final Thoughts

Of our students' musical talking points, we recognize that the first category of student talk, *what they heard*, might seem to be another version of *the elements*. We contend that groove, timbre and patterns of sound are more holistic and relational than the curricular lists of elements, and, of equal importance, they capture student thinking in student language.

We believe that the other categories of student talk, *how* and *why* they heard—their non-verbal gestures indicating their responses to anticipation fulfilled and denied, their verbal and physical expressions of joy in musicking, and their expressions of wonder about the ways that music is integral to our lives—are more compelling for students and more complicated for music educators. These aspects of students' responses address the personal and the mysterious.

We came to realize that what our students heard is only the tip of the iceberg. Our students taught us about the ways they make meaning from music and how they use opportunities for communal identity work engendered through shared musicking. When we set up listening opportunities and then became listeners ourselves, we witnessed the desire adolescents have to share their personal experiences of music and to bond with each other. We emphasize the necessity of an atmosphere of trust: students are vulnerable when they share their personal responses to music. We witnessed the ways that students built connection and community through many affirmations of shared resonance that accrued from collective music listening; these open-ended, student-directed, inquiry-based listening sessions were

clearly powerful for students. DeNora's (2000) description of "the resonance between the situations, the social relationships, the settings, the musics, and [the musickers] as emerging aesthetic agents with feelings, desires, moods" (67) captures some of what we are chasing here.

Regelski (2005a, 2005b, 2006; Regelski and Gates 2009) challenges music educators to query the difference music education makes to students' lives. We suggest that when music educators create a space where performing, creating and listening are happening in community, shaped by a pedagogy that recognizes the limitations of such curriculum fixtures as *the elements* and that builds on what students bring to the experience, it can make an enormous difference to students' sense of themselves, their peers, and their world. Given our goals to provide a context for the growth of healthy, resilient, agentive learners, we critique *the elements curricula* for continuing to encourage transmissive pedagogy which denies opportunities for identity-work, self-expression, connection and community.

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Notes

¹ Our work was fuelled particularly by the publication of Bartel, Lee. (Ed.) (2004). *Questioning the music education paradigm* and the dialogues captured in Elliott, David. (Ed.), (2005) *Praxial Music Education*.

² Teacher education programs use a variety of titles for the partnering teachers in schools who work with teacher candidates during their practica, e.g. host teachers, cooperating teachers, associate teachers.

³ We italicize *the elements of music* and *the elements* throughout this paper in an effort to convey a sense of “all that that entails”: *the elements* as received truth about all music everywhere, and a pedagogy that follows from a conception of music as a Lego-like assemblage of constituent bits.

⁴ Given the non-linguaged nature of music, it is important to recognize the limits of using language to talk about it. Metaphors, terms and other representations created to assist with verbal communication can be helpful, but are limited to the people who share the constructed understandings of their use.

⁵ We list from most valued knowledge to the least valued knowledge, as commonly conceived: Math, Science, Literacy and Language, followed by Social Sciences and finally, Music, Health and Physical Education, Visual Arts, Dramatic Arts and Dance, in that order. Ken Robinson makes similar observations at

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http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html and in *The Element* (2009).

⁶ See Wayne Bowman (2004) and Roger Johnson (2007) for discussions of embodied cognition.

⁷ Educators who have significantly influenced our thinking about oppression in schools include: Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Maxine Greene, Peter McLaren, Joe Kincheloe, Kevin Kumashiro, Lisa Delpit, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Deborah Britzman, Enid Lee, and Jim Cummins, and colleagues at the Center for Urban Schooling, OISE, University of Toronto, to name a few. We acknowledge them for helping us rethink our world in music education.

⁸ Alternately teachers abandon the listening part of a music program altogether. We see current classroom practice of “listening” isolated from performing and creating, attended to, if at all, in the margins of the year; after the big concert or before the term break, or in preparation for a written exam. We wonder if this is a signal that teachers don’t value (or enjoy teaching) *the elements* content, and whether a more holistic and student centered approach to listening would provide pedagogical inspiration.

About the Authors

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