

Embodied Relational Music Teaching: A Philosophy

Music learning happens through experiences within interactions that create a deeper understanding of the self and the world. Many music teachers cite their own personal experiences with music learning as the impetus for their career choice. Inseparable from those encounters is the lens through which they saw “that one music teacher,” the person who served as inspiration, mentor, and life-changer through the interactions they had- both musical and personal. The bonds formed between the teacher and the student, among the students themselves, and within the student’s mind and body. Through the strength of this bond, identity, and connection gave purpose to the music making beyond an aesthetic value. All these links exemplify a pedagogy I see as relational music teaching. While interactions embody different forms between the self and sound and between the self and others, relationships are inextricably linked with the experience in each instance.

Music learning empowers people through an interaction between the self and the sound source. This relationship can manifest externally from the person’s body, as is the case with an instrument the learner is playing or a recording to which the learner is listening. The interaction can also exist internally, within the consciousness and the body, as may happen for a composer, or in experiences of audiation. In singing, however, the interaction manifests both internally and externally, synthesizing the nature of both internal and external forms of understanding. Perhaps this explains why singing is so common as a general music class interaction. In all these forms, the interaction between the self and the sound exists within the mind and the body of the individual. The learner embodies the interaction in a personal context.

Merleau-Ponty (1945/2015) acknowledged this mind-body framing as extended embodiment, with the duality between internal and external interaction both reflecting and

effecting the environment in which the learner exists. The body is not simply an object to carry out the commands of the mind, but it is the mind itself incarnated. To return to the singing interaction, the sound that the learner creates inherently is their consciousness. Through the interaction of the flesh of the body-self and the sound source, "the body will draw to itself the intentional threads which bind it to its surroundings and finally will reveal to us the perceiving subject as the perceived world" (1945/2015, p. 453). The experience of perception is inextricable from sensual lived experience, which in the music classroom includes not only visual stimuli, but auditory and tactile interactions. Because this perception is bound to these dynamic contextual stimuli, both the teacher and the student are part of the interaction but also coextensively are the interaction.

The relational music teacher possesses a deep understanding of how this duality is situated uniquely for different people at different times. They acknowledge that there is not a single solution to solve a challenge a student faces because that individual person is part of the dynamism of the class with struggles that are uniquely bound by the student's context. By living in and through the experience, the teacher's embodied consciousness is joined with their students via their interactions- musical or otherwise—at a personal level. Relational music teachers understand the implications of bringing their own experiences with embodied interaction out of the private, personal realm and into their classroom both as a lens for viewing students and for viewing themselves. Similarly, they affirm each person's physical and musical presence as phenomenologically inseparable from their innate value.

Relational music teaching embodies traits that manifest through dialectic interactions. The inherent dialogic nature of teaching and learning addresses not only musical development, but also personal development of both the teacher and the students. This relationship presents

more as a duet than a duel. Though dialectical inquiry is often framed as discussion or debate with opposing perspectives, the dialectical duet between teacher and student harmonically moves all participants forward through their shared experience. As Jorgensen (1997) noted, each person is dialectically connected to the other's experience in a greater total capacity than the summation of its separated entities.

The Six "C's"

In the alliterative tradition of educational ideas, a chain of six "C's" frame the extended embodiment of relational music teaching. The relational music teacher is child-centered, culturally responsive, constructivist, caring, critically pedagogic, and community-centered. While these traits share some characteristics, they also have unique qualities that make them distinct from one another. For this reason, the relational music teacher is continually working to dimensionalize their understanding of each trait's manifestation throughout their career. The sequence of these "C's" will be unique to each individual teacher's personal experience, although I content that the first "C," child-centered, anchors the chain for the others in that a relational teacher must first look outside of themselves to truly embody the duality of internal and external interaction in both themselves and their students. Through awareness and development of these linked traits, the music teacher creates interactions that are rich for both musical and personal development in all persons.

Child-Centered



The relational music teacher designs and implements instruction that is developmentally appropriate for each of their students. Not only does a child-centered approach require teachers to possess a breadth of knowledge about stages of human development, but also to develop a depth of understanding of

each individual context- school, class, and student-- as a unique dimensionalization of the individual's experience. Dewey (1897) cautioned against ignoring the need for contextual differentiation when he wrote "we violate the child's nature and render difficult the best ethical results, by introducing the child too abruptly to a number of special studies, of reading, writing, geography, etc., out of relation to this social life" (p. 10). Experiential learning that alternates between concrete and abstract learning facilitates a whole-mind, whole-body, whole-heart learning engagement. Students and teachers continually learn, assess, learn and assess to provoke and refocus the teaching and learning. The repertoire and interactions a music teacher presents must match the children's social, emotional, physical, and musical developmental needs while also remaining porous enough to allow space for the child's mind, body, and heart. Selecting repertoire from a variety of sources that best conveys the musical objective and is also worth of the precious time and energy of music class is just one part of teaching from a child-centered approach. The teacher must also have facility with a variety of approaches to teaching the content itself to meet the needs of the actual children present. By immersing themselves in high-quality music professional development, the teacher broadens her or his view of repertoire through fully dimensionalized experiences. While the idea of having more "tools in the belt" is a common metaphor to explain the rationale for different types of teaching approaches, this is still a teacher-centered perspective in that the skills are still used by the body of the teacher. The child-centered perspective frames professional development less as a passive unidimensional tool and more of an active lens through which the child is still central, but brought into a different focus. Perhaps we might consider combining these concepts of focus, frame and lens into a new metaphor involving glasses! Through different types of professional development "goggles," different attention can be brought into focus on the child's heart, mind, and body.

Culturally Responsive



Embedded in the conceptualization of child-centeredness, culturally responsive music teachers honor the worlds of individual students by enacting cultural constructs from home with the curricular goals and vice versa (Lind & McCoy, 2016). Student and teacher interactions bridge the gaps between and among cultural values, personal music experiences, and individual identity within the context of the music classroom. Because music possesses a direct link to cultural, religious, and racial values, the culturally responsive teacher embraces the student's question "Why do we have to learn this?" as a quest for purpose and connectedness to the real world rather than as a complaint or challenge to authority. Abril (2009) notes the need for understanding to move beyond acknowledgement into action through informed decision making. The culturally-responsive teacher is compelled to action because of the intersections of home and school culture.

For the music teacher, consequent actions informed by cultural responsiveness are driven by a relational purpose found beyond the work in the classroom-- for both the teacher and the students. Gay (2018) challenges teachers to "create, clarify, and articulate clearly defined beliefs about cultural diversity generally and in education specifically because personal beliefs drive instructional behaviors" (p.216). Relational teaching and cultural responsiveness are interdependently informed by ethnic and cultural constructs. The relational teacher must engender an understanding of the cultures students bring with them- a craft that requires time and sensitivity on the music teacher's behalf and acceptance and security on the student's part. The music teacher interacts uniquely with the children in school setting in that they will likely teach the children over a period of several years. During a highly formational time of human

development, relational music teachers have a unique position to integrate diverse means of knowing. Lind and McCoy (2016) view cultural responsiveness as a path to expand music study to include a larger number of children. Music students become more active participants in their learning in settings that promote an intentional mindfulness of the histories and values students bring. By developing an awareness of cultural practices embodied within the school community relational music teachers can interact with students at a level fundamental to their unique identities and agencies.

Constructivist



Within the context of culturally responsive teaching, new understanding and knowledge are created through interpersonal experiences. The trait of cultural responsiveness links directly to constructivism. The constructivist music teacher co-creates learning by assimilating a child-centered, culturally responsive perspective with interactions that allow the individual student to discover and make meaning from the convergence of inter and intra-personal musicking experiences. Rather than rigidly applying a sequential methodology of instruction, the constructivist music teacher incorporates a breadth of teaching practices to encourage active learning. Vygotsky (1978) noted

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals (p. 57).

Embodied social interaction is foundational in cognitive growth. Students with various cognitive strengths serve as valued resources. Questioning by both the teacher and the students reveals new learning for all- the students learning how to learn and the teacher learning how to best teach their students. Problem-solving coexists with curiosity in relational music learning. Rather than viewing a student's uncertainty as an obstruction to the mastery of a standard, the constructivist teacher embraces the opportunity for interpersonal musicking that will create a greater sense of agency for their student. In a constructivist music class, all people are questioning, exploring, connecting, and assessing in reconciling new ideas with previous knowledge through an empowered agency.

Caring



The caring music teacher recognizes the unique potential in each child and works to foster the development of the fullest self for each person in their classroom. They see beyond the curriculum, the questions, and the assessments into the identity of the child. This happens through shared space, time, and presence in the world of the student. As Noddings (2013) wrote,

When a teacher asks a question in class and a student responds, she receives not just the 'response' but the student. What he says matters, whether it is right or wrong, and she probes gently for clarification interpretation, contribution. She is not seeking the answer but the involvement of the cared-for (p.186).

Relational teachers embody a posture of receptivity from their students and care flows from the encounter in an ethical way. The students' responses may be overt, such as smiles and verbal gratitude after a performance, or may be more nuanced as the students delve further into their musical risk-taking because of the confidence they have in their relationship with their teacher.

Safe, accepting spaces are hallmarks of caring teacher's classrooms. Students rest in a reassurance that their vulnerability will be supported by their teacher, so a wrong pitch is not a mistake, but a learning opportunity. This teacher sees potential and possibilities through knowing her or his children and uses that knowledge to affirm and nurture the resultant growth. They are willing to meet children at their level of need and connect to each child's unique means of thinking, feeling, and musicking.

Critically-Pedagogic



Critical consciousness, or conscientization, facilitates student agency, which facilitates Noddings (2013) "involvement of the cared for" (p. 186). The critically-pedagogic music teacher empowers students by evoking the critical consciousness of students as musically innate beings that grow through rich purposeful musicking experiences. They facilitate experiences that allow students to embody full awareness of their own knowledge and to wrestle with the implications of that knowledge. Students are empowered to intervene and advocate through their reflection for the radical social action. Critical Pedagogue Freire (1968/2018) asserted that "looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future" (p. 72). Writing specifically for critical pedagogy in music education, Abrahams (2005) noted the unique role music could serve as liberational from cultural school conventions of conformity. Through this freedom students are encouraged to engage in critical thinking, action and feeling. Rather than the teacher dictating skills to be mastered, students are charged to extend their thinking beyond convergent knowledge of facts into a divergent actionable perspective of why and how the knowledge should be used. The critically pedagogic teacher seeks to give voice to each student and to commit to activism on behalf of

their students (Wink, 2010). By challenging suppositions and transforming perspectives, the critically-pedagogic music teacher creates spaces for all students to reach for a fuller potential identity in who they were, who they are, and who they are becoming.

Community-Connected



The community-connected music teacher constructs a classroom society reflective of the social, cultural, and physical music contexts of the students' communities. Their teaching offers a space with a democratic and inclusive culture that values each person in the community for the individual perspectives they each contribute through musical interactions. Greene (2000) calls this a "we-relation" (p. 134) wherein the persons bear an accountability to interact cooperatively, and the relational-minded music teacher designs instruction with this responsibility at the forefront. The democracy in a community-connected classroom does not mean that the class is without goals and objectives, but rather that the teacher is cognizant of the power and authority that they possess with the position and uses that privilege to influence inclusivity of all people. This teacher strives to provide "space for musicians to achieve their potential rather than aim for perfection, for them to engage fully as participants, and to bountifully partake in the musical, social and cultural journey on route to whatever destination awaits." (Higgins & Willingham, 2017, p. 54). The students, together, bear responsibility among themselves and therefore possess both individual and collective agency toward learning. The musical interactions reflect an outward expansion of horizon of understanding through embodied community intersectionality rather than an isolationist intellectualized mindset.

In Conclusion

When my children were babies, we used toy chain links for a variety of purposes. Each link was different in color and texture, and though we used the same set of links for all three children, it seemed they were never used the same way with each child. For example, one child was a thrower of toys, so we would anchor one end on her stroller and the other to her lovie to keep it from being pitched to the ground. Another used them just one at a time as a teething ring or bracelet. My youngest would bat at them, giggling with delight at the sound of two clacking together. (We were always finding evidence as rings littered every room of the house!) The six “C’s” of my philosophy of teaching are much like these interlocking rings.



Each link has a unique implication on music instruction and serves to meet the diverse needs of different children and teachers. No single “C” holds a position of priority, but instead they join to cover the broadest range of educational needs. There are times in teaching where these needs require reprioritizing, so one day’s conceptualization of the chain is in a different order than the previous. Perhaps even a single link is metaphorically removed from the chain solely to focus in on the deficit of a particular “C” for a given situation. The scope of their use is only limited by the vision and creativity of the teacher, and as we work toward this facility and flexibility we must continually reexamine and reframe our actions with our students. Twenty-first century music teachers are challenged to acknowledge and address their own individual struggles with these traits. Music teachers find confidence in reflecting on those challenges, knowing that the

philosophy of relational teaching ultimately leads to a beautiful, artful, and strong chain of connection with their students.

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