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Starting the Conversation in Music Teacher Education Programs

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ABSTRACT

Diversity within a music program includes race, gender, class, age, and sexuality. Depending on individual teachers and school districts, certain elements of diversity are more acknowledged than others; sexuality and sexual orientation are often ignored. Yet, as one researcher notes, “currently, schools are being asked to transform themselves into caring communities of learning, and teachers are being invited to assume the role of community builder. Although the idea of creating learning communities carries popular appeal, little attention has been devoted to helping teachers to change their classrooms into personalized, caring learning environments” (Irvine, 2003, p. 75).

Music teaching is not autonomous from society, and LGBT issues prevalent throughout music history and culture should be included in instruction on establishing supportive learning environments within music teacher education programs. Pre-service teachers express relatively positive attitudes and feelings towards sexual minorities, but have limited knowledge of sexual orientation and homosexuality (Hirsh, 2007). Acknowledging matters of sexual orientation within music education will provide opportunities for pre-service music teachers to reflect on their understanding and bias regarding sexuality. Without such opportunities, inexperienced music teachers may encounter difficulty establishing LGBT-friendly music classes and ensembles.

Through a review of research in pre-service teacher education and sexual orientation, this conference session will address the following questions: 1) What do our future music teachers need to know about sexual identity and orientation? 2) How are these issues relevant to teaching? 3) What are the implications for future music teachers? Pedagogical practices from multicultural education will serve as models for developing pre-service music teachers’ awareness of LGBT issues within music teacher education programs.
Starting the Conversation in Music Teacher Education Programs

Diversity among students is an inherent part of teaching in any context; music education is no exception. When considering the diversity of students, this includes race, religion, social/economic status, ethnicity, age, gender, special needs, culture, and sexuality. In addition, it is important to bear in mind the diversity of our students’ attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, values, behavior, language, expression, and thoughts.

Historically, multicultural education has centered on certain elements of diversity more than others; sexuality and sexual orientation are often ignored (Jennings, 2007; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). Yet, as one researcher notes,

Currently, schools are being asked to transform themselves into caring communities of learning, and teachers are being invited to assume the role of community builder. Although the idea of creating learning communities carries popular appeal, little attention has been devoted to helping teachers to change their classrooms into personalized, caring learning environments. (Irvine, 2003, p. 75)

Music teaching is not autonomous from society, and issues related to sexuality prevalent throughout music history and culture should be included in instruction on establishing supportive learning environments within music teacher education programs. Acknowledging matters of sexual orientation within music education will provide opportunities for pre-service music teachers to reflect on their understanding and bias regarding sexuality. Without such opportunities, inexperienced music teachers may encounter difficulty establishing inclusive music classes and ensembles.

This paper explores starting the conversation with students in pre-service music teacher education programs. We frame our discussion of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning) issues in the larger context of diversity, acknowledging its impact on learning and teaching, and the challenges that this poses for future music teachers. Through a review of research, we first examine the extent to which the conversation about sexual orientation topics in teacher education programs has already started, and share paradigms and information on LGBTQ issues that may be useful to future music teachers. We then offer examples of successful methodologies (from different settings of diversity) for developing caring communities of learning as models for starting the conversation in your own program.
Pre-service Teacher Preparation

Among issues of diversity, little is being done in teacher preparation programs to inform future teachers about LGBTQ issues and their relevance to teaching. (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Jennings, 2007; Jennings & Sherwin, 2008; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). In a survey of 142 public university elementary and secondary teacher preparation programs across the US, Jennings (2007) found that the diversity topic perceived most important was race/ethnicity, followed by special needs, language diversity, and economic (social class); topics of gender and sexual orientation were considered not important.

Sherwin and Jennings’ 2006 and 2008 investigations into the inclusion of gay and lesbian topics in teacher preparation programs revealed that 40% of secondary teacher education programs and 44.4% of elementary teacher education programs do not address sexual orientation topics at all (Jennings & Sherwin, 2008; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). In their 2006 study, Sherwin and Jennings found that only 46 of the 77 secondary teacher preparation programs in public universities surveyed discussed issues related to sexuality. These topics included: pre-service teachers’ attitudes about sexual orientation (homophobia and heterosexism), risk factors for youth associated with sexual orientation (substance abuse, harassment, suicide, and drop-out), specific experiences of gay and lesbian youth in schools, gay and lesbian families and parents, the experiences of youth with gay or lesbian parents/guardians, inclusion of gay/lesbian content/topics in public school curriculum, and origins of sexual orientation.

In their 2008 study of the 65 elementary teacher preparation programs in public universities, Jennings and Sherwin found that only 36 reported to discuss issues related to sexuality in elementary teacher preparation programs. These programs included some of the same topics: gay/lesbian families, risk factors associated with sexual orientation, pre-service teachers’ attitudes about sexual orientation, specific experiences and needs of gay/lesbian youth in schools, inclusion of gay/lesbian content/topics in public school curriculum, experiences and needs of youth whose parents/guardians are gay or lesbian, and gay/lesbian contemporary culture.

Secondary and elementary teacher education programs that include topics of sexual orientation do so most frequently in foundation courses, occasionally in introduction to the field courses and in teaching methods courses, and less frequently during students teaching or practica courses (Jennings &
Sherwin, 2008; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). In contrast, other topics of diversity (such as race, gender, and social class) tend to be discussed in several different courses throughout a preparation program (Jennings & Sherwin, 2008; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). Similar findings suggest that while the sexual orientation may be discussed, it lacks a significant connection to in-practice teaching. Sherwin and Jennings (2008) commented, “It appears that even among inclusive programs, sexual orientation topics are isolated in theoretical foundation courses (which are commonly placed at the beginning of programs) and then become less frequent as students move into student teacher or other practica” (p. 267). These studies illustrate the absence of LGBTQ issues in teaching programs and advocate for addressing these topics across a teaching program to benefit pre-service teachers most.

Paradigms for Inclusion of LGBTQ Issues in Education

In a review of research, Szalacha (2004) identified three major paradigms for the inclusion of LGBTQ issues in education: safety, equity, and critical theory. Each paradigm represents an increasingly broader perspective for understanding and addressing LGBTQ issues. Knowledge of these paradigms may assist music teacher educators in facilitating informed discussions with students, and inform future music teachers regarding the creation of LGBTQ-friendly classroom settings.

Safety, the most common paradigm identified by Szalacha (2004), is preventative in nature (Szalacha, 2004). It attempts to protect LGBTQ youth from taunts and violence in schools, and educate students about suicide prevention and AIDS/HIV (Szalacha, 2004). This focus of safety through instruction approach may be effective to disseminate vital information and reduce instances of hostility and aggression in schools. But, it contributes to the perception that LGBTQ persons are victims while attempting to “keep the ‘problem’ under control” (Szalacha, 2004, p. 69). It also reinforces negative images that foster homophobia, defined as “an irrational fear, disgust, anxiety, or anger directed toward gay and lesbian people” (Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006, p. 67), and fails to consider the source or explain the reasons for such negative feelings toward LGBTQ youth.

Equity, the second paradigm, moves beyond mere prevention to change the social norm and help establish equal rights for LGBTQ individuals (Szalacha, 2004). It necessitates “equipping pre-service and in-service teachers with the knowledge and skills to treat all members of the school community with respect” (Szalacha, 2004, p. 69). In addition, it acknowledges the sexual orientation of LGBTQ persons,
and their relationships, roles and contributions to society (Szalacha, 2004). This approach may help affirm LGBTQ individuals through respectful interactions and a more visible and equitable representation in the curriculum.

Szalacha’s (2004) third paradigm of critical theory considers all sexualities and problematizes heteronormativity, the underlying assumption that all individuals are heterosexual. When applied in the context of teaching, Szalacha (2004) explains,

Educators are encouraged to examine school curricula and policies that normalize heterosexuality. The heavy emphasis on postmodern and critical social theory in this paradigm, however, does not easily lend itself to the development of practical skills necessary for classroom teachers and teacher educators. (p. 69)

Szalacha’s commentary that this paradigm may not provide useful skills for educators may be overstated. Knowledge of critical theory, specifically queer theory, and heteronormativity can be useful to explain why sexual orientation has not been more widely included in teacher preparation programs and why heterosexism continues to be commonplace in schools.

Queer theory, an evolving body of theories, seeks to uproot heterosexuality as the social norm, the view that heterosexual as “normal” and non-heterosexual as “deviant” (Bower & Klecka, 2009), and challenge heterosexism, “discrimination based on upon the presumed superiority of heterosexuality” (Sherwin & Jennings, 2006, p. 209). It views sexuality as fluctuating and changeable, it calls into question the labels, such as “gay”, “lesbian”, “bisexual”, and “transgender”. Its ultimate goal is to challenge and deconstruct the resultant discrimination based on these social constructs (Bower & Klecka, 2009).

Macgillivray and Jennings (2008) attribute the absence of LGBTQ issues in teacher preparation programs to heteronormative views. They write, “The systematic neglect of the needs of LGBT youth and families within teacher preparation coursework is rooted in heteronormative assumptions that present heterosexuality as the only legitimate sexual orientation.” (2008, p. 171). Macgillivray (2004) explains further,

The dominance, or the coercive power, of the institution of heterosexuality . . . coupled with the exclusion of other ways of being [e.g., LGBT] . . . justifies the assumed superiority of the heterosexual social order, not only of schools but of society by giving it a normative dignity while simultaneously hiding the mechanisms by which it asserts itself as the natural order. The result is that teachers . . . perpetuate the exclusion and abuse of [LGBTQ] students as an accepted
sociocultural practice by failing to make their classrooms safe and inclusive for [LGBTQ] students. (p. 113)

Queer theory offers a theoretical framework for exploring the heteronormative assumption that pervades schools and society, and a broader and more fluid understanding of sexuality. Heightening awareness of sexuality from this perspective as a component in teacher preparation programs may enable pre-service music teachers to expand their knowledge and understanding of the needs of their LGBTQ students.

Starting the Conversation

It is necessary to acknowledge the difficulty of “starting the conversation” of LGBTQ issues. Fear of offending students or colleagues, pressure to “know everything”, and stress of facilitating a positive and productive discussion may prevent educators from even considering starting the conversation. In addition, because “conversation” implies an ongoing dialog and not a “one and done” discussion, starting the conversation about LGBTQ issues is not simply “planting seeds of thinking that eventually may germinate into positive, progressive, social action, if only on an individual scale” (Schramm-Pate, Lussier, & Jeffries, 2008, pp. 1-2).

As viewed in a larger context of diversity, similarities exist between basic structures of multicultural education and education regarding LGBTQ topics, as well as between concerns of political correctness. Within multicultural education, many teachers believe that if student race is acknowledged or issues of ethnicity are discussed in their classroom, they might be labeled as insensitive, or worse, racist.

However, when teachers ignore their students’ ethnic identities and their unique cultural beliefs, perceptions, values, and worldviews, they fail as culturally responsive pedagogists. Color-blind teachers claim that they treat all students ‘the same,’ which usually means that all students are treated as if they are, or should be, both white and middle class. (Irvin, 2003, p. xvii)

A growing trend in education assumes that equality can be achieved by ignoring differences and treating all children as if they are the same (Goodman, 2001; Irvin, 2003). Therefore, educators may choose to avoid specific discussions in order to keep away from controversial or politically-heated topics. According to Wink (2001) however, pedagogical choices made are political statements.
When you choose curriculum, it is a political act. When you make a decision about who will learn what and how, you are taking political action. And even if you choose not to act, your passivity is also a political action. (Wink, 2001, p. 211).

Therefore, starting the conversation regarding LGBTQ issues involves understanding and acknowledging ourselves as teacher educators, including our preconceived notions about people. Darling-Hammond (2002) challenges teachers to develop non-stereotypical ways of understanding individual young people, while recognizing and appreciating the ways in which culture and context influence their lives and learning.

This kind of understanding is to be distinguished from the romantic pity many people express for children who live in challenging circumstances—a sentiment reflecting merely a more well-intentioned blindness to who students really are. Instead, teachers need to develop both an empathy for what others experience and a capacity to perceive each student as a person and as a learner, with tools that reduce prejudicial filters and that enhance the accuracy of those perceptions. (Darling-Hammond, 2002, p. 209)

Remaining open to the idea of learning with our students may ease pressure placed upon educators to “know everything” from the beginning. Goodman (2001) acknowledges that, as educators, we cannot hold ourselves solely responsible for changing the world by instituting change within our classrooms. However, “we can provide opportunities for children to bring their home worlds into the classroom and become articulate and critical learners. In addition, we can become learners with students striving to understand and challenge injustice in our society” (Goodman, 2001, p. 18).

In addition to learning with our education students through conversations about LGBTQ issues, Kumashiro (2004) suggests an approach to teacher preparation that centers on teaching to uncertainty and disrupting the desire for certainty. He encourages students (and educators) to raise critical questions about the nature of what and how they are learning. This practice requires teachers to allow for a level of vulnerability and unpredictability within the classroom, for which Kumashiro believes teachers have not been prepared. “Perhaps the desire for certainty and control has prevented us from imagining and engaging in ways of teaching that would allow us to escape the oppressive relations that have seemed inescapable in education” (Kumashiro, 2004, p. 15). Irvin (2003) praises ideas regarding “teaching the conflicts” that have been explored and discussed by educational pedagog Graff (1993). Irvin writes,
Graff believes that a productive response to the “culture wars” on campuses is to advance the notion of “conflict” as the center and object of a common agenda. Disputes and the agreement to disagree with the help of common values, goals, language, and assumptions become the glue for a common cultural discussion. This shared agenda is quite different from the illusive and often disputatious search for a consensus that often leaves faculty and students of color and other marginalized persons discontented, excluded, and alienated. (Irvin, 2003, p. 19)

Therefore, structuring the conversation to allow space for assenting and dissenting opinions is important, as is preparing for any potential topic or discussion climate. This conversation is not starting with expectations to finish; rather, a key feature of starting the conversation is to generate questions rather than produce answers. Through critical questioning, discussion, and reflection “the lesson is essentially dialogic and the agenda of the different participants is able to emerge” (Pryor, 2001, p. 74) Although starting the conversation is not as simplistic as following a prescribed curriculum, examination of methods utilized to address diversity within a variety of college-level courses provides insight on varying levels of depth to which educators may delve into LGBTQ issues, as discussed earlier regarding Szalacha’s (2004) paradigms of safety, equity, and critical theory. Of course discussions reviewed, three elements remained constant: methods of critical questioning, examination of personal identity, and reflection and/or synthesis.

**Critical Questioning**

Critical questioning provides space and opportunity to explore and deeply discuss topics of diversity, whether multicultural education or LGBTQ issues. Gladstein (2001) defines critical question as “questioning [that] helps give some distance so that an individual might be able to look at a situation from a different perspective” (p. 183). Through critical questioning and analysis of course content, her English Second Language students were empowered from “the awareness of the definition and complexity of identity, culture, and difference and their interaction with each other and within the students’ lives” (Gladstein, 2001, p. 184).

Gladstein’s (2001) course, “American Society,” was framed around six broad questions through which topics were introduced: (a) What is culture?; (b) What is identity?; (c) How do others see me in American society?; (d) How are identity and culture connected?; (e) What is difference?; and (f) How do identity, culture, and difference exist in American society? (p. 185). Throughout the course, Gladstein’s students constantly referenced questions that she adapted from Catherine Wallace’s (1995) study on critical reading in order to encourage their understanding of critical questioning: (a) What is
your reaction to the article?; (b) What is the author’s message?; (c) Why was the article written?; (d) Who was the intended audience? Who did the author want to read his/her article?; (e) Are all perspectives represented in the article? If not, whose is missing?; (f) Why do they think the author left out that perspective?; and (g) If you could change anything in the article what would it be and why? (p. 186).

Darling-Hammond and Garcia-Lopez (2001) composed critical questions for use within discussions of diversity: (a) What does diversity mean to you?; (b) What are the implications of human diversity for learning and teaching and for the work of educators?; (c) What are the dilemmas posed by diversity in schools?; (d) How do our own backgrounds shape how we view diversity?; and (e) How does rhetoric about inclusion match reality in schools you have experienced as a student or a teacher? (p. 11).

Conley (2005) utilized critical questioning techniques throughout his investigation of LGBTQ issues in collaboration with preservice teachers. Examples of questions include the following, which were taken from Adams, Bell, and Griffin’s (1997) Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: (a) When is the first time in school that you remember talking about a sexual orientation other than heterosexuality?; (b) What were your early learnings about LGBTQ people?; (c) Were stereotypes involved? If not in school, from what sources did you get this information?; (d) How did you learn that you were expected to be heterosexual?; and (e) How would your life be different if you were a sexual orientation other than what you are right now? (p. 247).

Personal Identity

Moving from critical questioning, a prominent topic in courses regarding diversity and LGBTQ issues was that of personal identity. Kroger (2000) identified identity as “the study of who I am and of how my biology, psychology, and society interact to produce that subjective sense of the person who is ‘genuinely me.’” (p. 7). Although the following examples explored identity in various ways, each maintained focus on the same core question, “Who am I?” van den Berg (2001) created an undergraduate education course on cultural diversity to address identity within the context of culture. He encouraged students to explore their own cultures, “to identify the levels of difference and diversity that exist within their group, and to proceed from there to deep discussion of key issues of diversity – race, gender, social class, language, disadvantage and giftedness, and so on” (p. 151). The first
assignment of van den Berg’s (2001) course addressed personal culture: “Reflect on your own life and the way in which you have been socialized or educated into a particular “culture,” and attempt to describe what the keystones of that personal culture are” (p. 153). The middle three assignments continued students’ examination of their own identity through cultural exploration:

1. Report on a cultural activity in which you are a minority, or where you feel that you are “different” in significant ways from the participants.

2. Choose a person from a different “culture” – someone with a different sexual orientation, a recent immigrant, an elder citizen, a street person, a person from another racial group, etc. – and meet with this person in order to write an oral history of a particular event that the person participated in or experienced, or an oral biography of a phase in or aspect of the person’s life.

3. Do one of three things in self-constituted small groups:
   
   I. Read a book together, written by a person different from your group in terms of culture, race, age, ability, class, or gender, and write a report on the experience.
   II. Develop and maintain a scrapbook of newspaper clippings or themes related to multicultural issues and/or the way people who are deemed to be “different” are treated in this society, and write an accompanying report.
   III. Select a key issue of international concern or attention over the last year, search out some writings that present a view strongly critical of the U.S. position, and prepare a paper on the issue. (van den Berg, 2001, p. 153)

Gladstein’s (2001) “What is identity?” experience within her “American Society” course was a cornerstone activity for her class. As students entered the classroom, quotes about identity were posted in various places throughout the room. The students were instructed to read the quotes as they entered and sit by the one with which they most agreed or wished to discuss. Within each group, students were given three tasks: (a) Share why you chose the quote you did. What stood out for you?; (b) How is your quote connected with identity?; and (c) Each group should create their own quote about identity. Quotes created by students, versus famous individuals, are now used at the beginning of this activity with Gladstein’s classes. Examples include: “If others judge me it will not be correct, they do not know me because I don’t know myself”; “You need to love yourself in order to experience yourself or understand yourself”; “If you want to succeed in your life, you have to know about yourself”; and “Identity is all the colors of the world.”
Conley (2005) facilitated discussions on identity throughout his course on LGBTQ issues in collaboration with pre-service teachers. The following activity and assignment was specifically designed to address identity:

**Activity:** Over the course of two meetings, student-participants and I shared our significant sociocultural and sociopolitical identity markers in the form of autobiographical presentations of self. We shared our autobiographies through art, poetry, stories, and photographs.

**Journal Prompt:** How has your experience with/in LGBTQ communities impacted your understanding of LGBTQ people, issues, and concerns? If you do not have LGBTQ-inclusive experiences, describe the barriers that have hindered your potential to engage in these experiences/relationships. (Conley, 2005, p. 250)

**Reflection and Synthesis**

Space and time for reflection and synthesis is a valuable aspect of starting, and continuing, the conversation of LGBTQ issues because “the object of the activity is to generate questions rather than to produce answers” (Pryor, 2001, p. 74). Cristol (2001) reported that developing pre-service teachers’ multicultural perspective is an “intricate undertaking” as well as an “evolutionary process” (p. 174), which could also be said of the development of a LGBTQ perspective.

With regard to conversations of multiculturalism, which parallel those of LGBTQ issues, Irvine (2003) held that a strict “curriculum approach” to conversation denied students opportunity for reflection and synthesis, as it “ignores developmental aspects of cross-cultural competence that require time for pre-service teachers (many of them young adults) to grapple with, reflect upon, and assimilate complicated issues associated with their own personal, social, cultural, and ethnic identities” (p. 17). Irvine encouraged discussions that involved processes of examination, reflection, and collective struggle that resulted in “a critical precursor for positive organizational change” (p. 19).

The final assignment of van den Berg’s (2001) undergraduate education course on cultural diversity required students to revisit the first assignment “in the light of change or lack of change over the course of the semester” (p. 153). Although most students commented that the course impacted their understanding of cultural diversity, one student’s comment on the process of perspective development was described by van den Berg as truly honest and wise:

> You cannot necessarily change people’s views with one course. It takes time. That, if nothing else, is something I know all too well. The papers made sense; they had some effect. Maybe that effect was less than what you’d hoped for...but any amount of change is good. (van den Berg, 2001, p. 160)
Conley (2005) also established experiences of reflection and synthesis for his class of preservice teachers examining LGBTQ issues within a section of the course titled “Analyzing our Growth and Development”:

Activity: These three class sessions gave us the opportunity to synthesize our learning. During one session, we generated a list of terms that we had used/acquired throughout our year of collaboration. From this list we, as a group, generated overarching themes related to our learning. In small groups we selected one theme to explore and write about more fully. These writings resulted in what we came to call Final Consensus Documents. During these sessions, we also developed a website as a means to represent the work we had accomplished. (Conley, 2005, p. 256)

The conversation presented throughout this paper was intended to generate more questions than to produce answers. However, through contemplation of the research and writings discussed, as well as through consideration of various methodologies for structuring a conversation about LGBTQ issues, we hope to have provided food for thought and acknowledgement of support for you to begin the conversation within your own music education programs.
References


