Discourses Surrounding Marginalized Groups, LGBTQ Issues, and Music Learning and Teaching Practices in Season 1 of *Glee*

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ABSTRACT

In *Glee*, the newest TV show from Ryan Murphy, a group of marginalized “misfits” seeks to find their place in the high school social hierarchy in a small town in Ohio. In this study, we specifically examine the show’s portrayal of identities, relationships, and dynamics among teachers, students, and administration surrounding the constructed music learning environment. Three initial research questions were posited regarding *Glee*: What are the discourses surrounding marginalized groups, in particular LGBT representations? What are the discourses surrounding music learning and teaching? What implications do these discourses have for the field of music education and teacher preparation?

Our research is based in queer theory and uses discourse analysis as a methodology. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) looks at how “language in-use” (Hanks, 1996) indexes and reveals information about beliefs, identities, histories, and cultures (Gee, 2005). Data was collected through multiple viewings of each episode of the first season of *Glee*, specifically looking for *cruces tension points* (Fairclough, 1995a, 1995b) within these episodes. We then identified six episodes, transcribed, coded, and further analyzed each one to reveal the various meanings and intentions of the participants involved. This allowed us to uncover the structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in language (Wodak, 1995).

The following three primary discourses were identified and described: power, identity, and agency. These three discourses intersected and conflicted in discourses of social hierarchy and heterosexism. The following ways in which representations in *Glee* impact our field were explored: 1) the music classroom as social sanctuary for students who are marginalized in other settings within the school; 2) the dominance of a talent model within the school music program; and 3) the demonstration
of music education as a product valuing enterprise, rather than a process valuing enterprise. Suggestions for future research were included.

**Discourses Surrounding Marginalized Groups, LGBTQ Issues, and Music Learning and Teaching Practices in Season 1 of Glee**

**Background**

In *Glee*, the newest TV show from Ryan Murphy, a group of marginalized “misfits” seeks to find their place in the high school social hierarchy in a small town in Ohio. The show is a modern media representation of a school music environment for a mass popular audience. Since the show’s beginning less than a year ago, websites devoted to *Glee* and *Glee* fans (known as Gleeks), Facebook and Twitter pages, cell phone apps, an hour-long *Oprah* special, cover articles in *TV Guide*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Billboard*, and *Rollingstone*, as well as appearances on every major talk show, and a national tour have saturated popular culture.

In this study, we specifically examine the show’s portrayal of identities, relationships and dynamics among teachers, students, and administration surrounding the constructed music environment. Three guiding research questions were posited about the TV show *Glee*: What are the discourses surrounding marginalized groups, in particular queer representation? What are the discourses surrounding music learning and teaching? What implications do these discourses have for the field of music education and teacher preparation?

**Theoretical Framework**

Our research is based in queer theory, a democratizing way to understand and examine how sexual identities are constructed, produced, and distributed. As Jagose (1996) describes, “queer is less an identity than a critique of identity” (p. 131). Edelman (1995), Halperin (1995), and Butler (1993) describe queer as an identity that is under construction, and queer theory as a process toward a realization of an unimaginable future. Jagose (1996), Edelman (1995) and Butler (1993), warn of theorizing queer in terms of its opposition to identity politics. They instead encourage stakeholders to “represent it as ceaselessly interrogating both the preconditions of identity and its effects” (Jagose, 1996, p. 132). Queer theory emerged out of post-structural thought and ultimately functions to critique
the nature of identity in order to display the very things that limit its (re)construction and (re)production.

One of largest influences on queer activism and scholarship has stemmed from the literary works of French historian Michel Foucault. Foucault argues that sexuality is a discursive production rather than a natural condition and is part of his larger contention that modern subjectivity is an effect of networks of power (Jagose, 1996, p. 81). Foucault believes power is “exercised from innumerable points” to no predetermined effective, and therefore is not only negative or repressive but also productive and enabling, (Foucault, 1981, p. 94). Foucault also believes that “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1981, p. 95), a resistance “coextensive with [power] and absolutely its contemporary” (Foucault, 1988, 122). Like power, resistance is (re)constructed and (re)produced, and distributed and circulated through discourse. “Discourse, then, is entirely within (yet not necessarily in the service of) the mechanisms of power” (Jagose, 1996, p. 82). Multiple theories and methods regarding how to analyze power mechanisms within discourse have emerged simultaneously with queer studies. The following section draws upon the works of Gee (1996; 2005), Fairclough (1989; 1992; 1995a; 1995b) Wodak (1995), and outlines a method of critique that compliments queer theory.

**Methodology**

This study looks specifically at how “language in-use” (Hanks, 1996) indexes and reveals information about beliefs, identities, histories, and cultures (Gee, 2005). The language we use carries meaning and has a reflexive relationship with context. Reflexive refers to the idea that an utterance influences what we take the context to be and context influences what we take the utterance to mean. Context refers to an ever-widening set of factors that accompany language-in-use. These include the material setting, the persons present (and what they know and believe), the language that comes before and after a given utterance, the social relationships of the persons involved, and their ethnic, gendered, and sexual identities, as well as cultural, historical, and institutional factors.

According to Gee (2005), whenever we speak, we simultaneously construct seven areas of reality: significance, activities, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and semiotics. Gee calls these the seven building tasks of language, and suggests that we ask the following seven questions to better identify and understand the discourse(s) in use:
Analysts who study discourse or language-in-use, look for *cruces tension points* (Fairclough, 1995a, 1995b) during their observations. These are moments of crisis, difficulty or impending change indicated by language-in-use, and these moments, in turn, present opportunities for deeper analysis, and deconstruction. Once a *cruces tension point* has been identified and transcribed, analysts can begin to interpret and explain the various meanings and intentions of the participants involved, uncovering the structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in language (Wodak, 1995).

**Procedures**

For the purposes of this study, data was collected through multiple viewings of each episode of the first season of *Glee*, specifically looking for *cruces tension points* (Fairclough, 1995a, 1995b) within the episodes. We then identified six episodes, transcribed, coded, and further analyzed each one to identify the multiple discourses at work throughout the show. Once the discourses at work were identified through detailed categorical descriptions of the setting, activity, and participant(s), we revisited Gee’s seven questions. This aided our understanding of how the discourses are used within the settings and activities to (dis)connect and/or (dis)privilege certain ways of knowing and believing. Finally, we drew upon social theory to reveal ideological underpinnings of the discourses in use in order to interrupt the systemic practices we analyzed.

**Results**

After watching each television episode of the first season of *Glee* and choosing six particular episodes for further viewing and analysis, it became clear that a number of discourses were at work
throughout the writing and acting of this show. We identified power, identity, and agency as three primary discourses. Each one of these discourses played out extensively throughout the season, often intersecting and conflicting with one another to create new discourses.

**Power**

From the beginning of the pilot episode, power emerged as a dominating theme enacted via the school setting in which the show takes place. During the establishing shot, Sue Sylvester, the antagonist of the show, scowls while watching her intensely competitive cheerleading squad practice their routine. “You think this is hard?” she shouts through her megaphone, “Try being water-boarded. That’s hard.” Following this establishing vignette, the show cuts to the main adult character; Spanish teacher, Will Schuster. Mr. Schuester walks by a group of high school football players sporting letter-jackets. The athletes surround a smaller student, Kurt. Kurt is standing in front of a dumpster wearing a designer sweater and holding a leather satchel.

Will (Teacher): Making some new friends, Kurt?
Puckerman (athlete): He sure is Mr. Schu!
Will: Hey Finn, I still need that report on “que estuvas en el verano pasado”
Finn (athlete): What?
Will: What you did last summer.
Finn: I’m halfway done with almost all of it, Mr. Schu.

The group waits for Mr. Schuester to pass, then Puckerman, the leader of the group, says, “It’s hammer-time.” The athletes start hoisting Kurt into the dumpster. Kurt shouts, “Please, this is from Marc Jacobs’ new collection!” Finn considers this. “Wait!” he tells his teammates. The athletes temporarily drop Kurt. Kurt hands his bag to Puckerman and removes his sweater, handing it to Finn. Finn says, “Ok” and the athletes dump Kurt in the dumpster. These establishing shots clearly illustrate the power struggles within the school setting.

Teachers and coaches assert their power over the students, in both positive and negative ways. The cheerleading coach, Sue Sylvester, is often portrayed as a bully, shouting insults at her cheerleaders. “That’s sloppy! You’re sloppy babies! It’s just disgraceful! And I want the agony out of your eyes! Stop crying! You’re the weakest link!” Will Schuster is most often portrayed as a teacher who takes a more nurturing approach and is concerned with helping students find their identities and voices. This can be seen in the following excerpt from episode eighteen, “Laryngitis”:
ESTABLISHING IDENTITY: LGBT STUDIES AND MUSIC EDUCATION

May 23 through 26, 2010

Will: Glee Club is about a myriad of voices coming together as one. Alright? This ends now. Which is why your assignment for the week, is for each one of you to come up with a song that best represents how you see yourself. Where you are in your lives, right now. Your voice. Then, you’re going to stand up here and sing your hearts out. All of you.

Kurt: Solos, in front of everyone?

Will: The Glee Club has lost its voice. It’s time for us to get it back.

All characters in Glee (re)produce, (re)enact, and (re)distribute the discourse of power throughout the school day. The discourse of power is most evident in the interacting roles of teacher, student, and administrator.

Identity

Identity is the most frequent of the discourses. Each character’s identity on the show represents an exaggerated form of a high school persona. Self-identified as a group of “misfits,” the characters are introduced to the viewing audience by way of their Glee Club auditions. The use of stereotype and hyperbole in these audition sequences sets a precedent for these features in future episodes of the show. Mercedes, a confident young black woman is on stage wailing R-E-S-P-E-C-T by Aretha Franklin. Kurt, the fashion conscious gay male who was thrown in the dumpster during the establishing vignette, steps on stage and says, “Hello, I’m Kurt Hummel and I’ll be singing Mr. Cellophane.” He goes on to perform the entire number in a high falsetto. His choice of song suggests that he is not seen for who he really is, and his choice to sing in a female range blurs the lines between gender and sexuality. Artie, a boy in a wheelchair is first introduced with a camera angle that pans over his back without showing his face. The camera instead lands on Tina, a stuttering Asian girl, dressed in black with gothic attire and makeup. Artie’s audition is not shown and cut from the introduction, further establishing his marginalization as a person with disability and suggesting he is often overlooked as a person. Instead, we see Tina, who is shown on stage singing, I Kissed A Girl, by Katy Perry. Tina incorporates sexual movements in her performance, suggesting perhaps that the act of performance has the ability to transform her into a less shy, more empowered character. Finally, a White girl dressed in a
plaid skirt and collared shirt signs her name, Rachel Berry, on the audition sheet and places a gold star after it.

Rachel: Hi, my name is Rachel Berry and I will be singing On My Own from the seminal Broadway classic, Les Miserables.

Will: Fantastic, let’s hear it.

Rachel begins singing and we hear her inner monologue,

Rachel: You might laugh because every time I sign my name I put a gold star after it. But it’s a metaphor and metaphors are important. My gold stars are a metaphor for me being a star.

In this sequence, Rachel turns and Puckerman purposefully throws a red, slushy drink on her as he walks down the hallway. The bell rings. Next, the audience sees Rachel marching down the hallway covered in red, slushy drink. Rachel’s inner monologue:

Rachel: And just so we’re clear, I want to clear up the rumor that I’m the one who turned that closet case, Sandy Ryerson in just because he gave Hank Saunders the solo I deserved. That’s cock—poopy!

We see Rachel in Principal Figgins’ office crying. She sobs to the principal, “He was touching Hank ... caressing him! It was so wrong.” Principal Figgins, looking blasé, hands her a box of tissues.

Rachel: I am not homophobic. In fact, I have two gay dads. See, I was born out of love. My two dads interviewed potential surrogates based on beauty and IQ. Then they mixed their sperm together and to this day we don’t know which one is my real dad, which I think is pretty amazing.

The audience sees pictures of Rachel and her two dads on her bedroom mirror. One is White, the other is Black.

Rachel: My dad’s spoiled me in the arts. I was given dance lessons, vocal lessons, anything to give me a competitive edge.

Rachel is shown as a child, tap dancing in full dance-costume as older children look on with disdain. She is then shown in three quick shots: sitting with her pink laptop, setting up a tripod, and filming herself singing On My Own. Her inner monologue continues,

Rachel: You may think that all the boys at school would be eager to tap this, but my MySpace schedule keeps me way too busy to date. I try to post a MySpace video on my page everyday, just to keep my talent alive and growing. Nowadays, being anonymous is worse than being poor. Fame is the most important thing in our culture now. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that no one’s just going to hand it to you.

The Glee writers use this inner monologue as a way to introduce the show’s star, who proclaims that she has literally been bred for this role by two gay men who have raised her to believe that she must consistently work at whatever cost to achieve fame; and that fame is the ultimate key to success.
As a gay teen, Kurt is faced with a number of scenarios that challenge his true identity. In the third episode, Acafellas, he first reveals his sexual orientation to his best friend Mercedes. Later, in episode four, Preggers, he comes out to his dad. Earlier in Preggers, Kurt joins the football team in an attempt to show his dad that he is not gay. After returning home from kicking the game winning point, he is shown in the basement of his house using facial products in front of a vanity mirror.

Kurt: Nighttime skin care is a big part of my post-game ritual.
Dad: I don’t know what to say about that but I was really proud of you tonight, Kurt. I wish your mom could’ve been there...you know, alive.
Kurt: Thanks...Dad. I have something that I want to say. I’m glad that you’re proud of me. But I don’t want to lie anymore. Being a part of the Glee Club and football has really showed me that I can be anything. And what I am is...I’m gay.
Dad: I know.
Kurt: Really?
Dad: I’ve known since you were three. All you wanted for your birthday was a pair of sensible heels...I guess I’m not in love with the idea but if that’s who you are, there’s nothing I can do about it. And I love you just as much. Ok? (hugs Kurt) Thanks for telling me Kurt.... You’re sure, right?
Kurt: Yeah, dad... I’m sure
Dad: Just checking

The above examples of Mercedes and Kurt’s dialogue, demonstrate how one’s individual identity can intersect with a collective identity. Characters in Glee often describe what an association with a group or team can mean for their individual identities and social status.

Mercedes: Okay, stop right there- we are in Glee Club. That means we are at the bottom of the social heap. Special Ed kids will get more play than we will. The only thing that gets me by is my knowledge that we are superior to all of them.

The discourses between individual and collective identities often interact with the discourse of power, creating a social hierarchy that ultimately requires individuals to make choices. These choices are the third discourse found throughout the show, which we label agency.

Agency

The discourse of agency is demonstrated through the character Finn in the pilot episode when he is forced to choose between being on the football team and being in glee club. At the end of the
episode, Finn recognizes that both teams need him and as a result he has the power to make the choice to remain in both.

| Puckerman: | What do you want me to do, apologize? That’s not me dude. Look, if I joined the flag team, you’d beat the crap out of me. I just don’t understand why- |
| Finn: | Schuster told me if I joined the club he’d give me enough extra credit to pass. I didn’t have a choice. If I fail another class, I’d be off the team. Look it’s over. I quit. Anything else? |
| Puckerman: | That’s it. And as a welcome back to the land of the normal, I got you a present. |
| Finn: | What’s that noise? |

Cut to Artie locked in porta pottie

| Puckerman: | We got that wheelchair kid inside. We’re going to flip it. |
| Finn: | Isn’t that kind of dangerous? |
| Puckerman: | He’s already in a wheel chair. Come one dude, we saved you the first roll. |

Finn lets Artie out of the porta pottie

| Puckerman: | What the hell, dude? I can’t believe you’re helping out this loser. |
| Finn: | Don’t you get it, man? We’re all losers. Everyone in this school. Hell, everyone in this town. Out of all the kids who graduate, maybe half will go to college and maybe two will leave the state to do it. I’m not afraid of being a loser cause I accept that that’s what I am. But I am afraid of turning my back on something that actually made me happy for the first time in my sorry life. |
| Puckerman: | So what? Are you quitting to join homo explosion? |
| Finn: | No. I’m doing both. Cause you can’t win without me and neither can they. |

Findings

The three main discourses of power, identity, and agency converge and diverge during various interactions throughout the season. Power consistently converges with identity each time a role is enacted by a student, teacher, or administrator. This convergence ultimately contributed to a new type of discourse of social hierarchy, which we see played out during the show.

Social Hierarchy

| Sue: | So you want to talk to my Cheerios about joining Glee Club. |
| Will: | Well, I need more kids...performers. And all the best ones are in Cheerios so I thought some of them might want to double-up. |
| Sue: | See, what you’re doing right now is called blurring the lines. High school is a caste system. Kids fall into certain slots. The jocks and your popular kids, up in the penthouse. The invisibles and the kids playing live action druids and trolls out in the forest...bottom floor. |
| Will: | And where do the Glee kids lie? |
| Sue: | Sub-basement |
All characters within the discourse of social hierarchy are faced with choices, thus the discourse of agency also plays a role. Some characters abuse the discourse of power by limiting the agency of others in order to dominate them. We can see this played out in the pilot episode with Ken, the football coach, who struggles to produce a winning football team and believes that having players on his team with interests outside of football will worsen his chances of winning.

Ken: You’re the quarterback! No, I don’t want to hear it. You make a decision. You’re a football player or you’re a singer.

Ken attempts to deny his quarterback’s outside interests and limit Finn’s agency by forcing a commitment to one school activity – football. This limiting and granting of power as well as the limiting and granting of agency occurs also between the administration and teachers. Sue Sylvester is granted power by Principal Figgins because she brings prestige and exposure to the school through her successful competitive cheerleading squad. High commodities in schools, such as, scheduling, space, and funding are granted to some while restricted to others. Everything has a price, thus the discourse of social hierarchy is enacted among the professionals in the show as well, as the students. Students in glee club seem hyper-aware of the social hierarchy. Those at the top of the hierarchy enact the power discourse in order to maintain their position. They use the discourse of power to suppress the individual identities of others in order to maintain their status, thus creating an us against them power struggle.

Being part of a higher collective identity requires making choices that will put others down, which brings the discourse of agency into play. We see this conflict played out between Puck and Mercedes in episode eighteen.

Puckerman: You hear that.?... it’s the sound of order being restored
Mercedes: No man of mine is going to be pulling stuff like this.
Puckerman: Babe, this is what we do. I mean, look at them. They need this. Without the fear of a good dumpster toss, there’d be chaos up in this place. Look, you don’t need to like it, but you need to accept that this is the way things are. Cause now we’re part of the system. We’re at the top of the heap. Who’s next?

Puckerman’s character embraces his position within the social hierarchy. He recognizes that his power affords him a privilege that others do not have; and he is able to use the discourse of power to enact events for which others in the social hierarchy would be ridiculed. This is represented when he says, “I’m a stud, dude. I could wear a dress to school and people would think it’s cool.” Puck is a confident athlete with an unquestioned heterosexual identity. Because he is secure in the knowledge
that others would rarely question his masculinity or his heterosexuality, he is empowered with the agency to speak and act any way he seems fit. Others in Glee, like Kurt, are not as privileged. When a character like Kurt, whose sexual or masculine identity is often challenged, has the potential of forming an association with those whose sexual and masculine identities are rarely challenged, the result is a new discourse of heterosexism.

Heterosexism

Heterosexism is a result of the convergence and divergence of the three discourses of power, identity, and agency. When a character fears that his or her identity, power, and agency is threatened, he or she often discriminates against others in order to restore his or her position in the social hierarchy. Thus, this discourse also intersects with the aforementioned discourse of social hierarchy. We see this in the following interaction between Finn and the football team after Kurt joins the team as the new kicker and Will suggests to Coach Ken to build team morale and cohesiveness by teaching them to dance.

Finn: Well, I think we really came together this week as a team.
Puck: Yeah a gay team. A big gay team of dancing gays.
Player: Seriously Finn. It was fun in practice and everything but we can’t do that out here in front of everybody. It’ll make us even more of a joke.

According to Jung & Smith (1993), heterosexism is a term that applies to a system of power that discriminates in favor of opposite-sex sexuality and relationships. It presumes that everyone is or wants to be heterosexual or that attractions and relations with an opposite sex is the norm. When the discourse of heterosexism is used, it ranks lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people as inferior. Words like: gay and homo become synonymous with hurtful labels that place people as inferior to those wielding insults. We see this in the above example as well as an earlier one when Puck says, “So...what? Are you quitting to join homo explosion?” When Puck uses the words gay and homo he associates them with something that is inferior, thus reaffirming his sexuality and masculinity as superior and positioning his association with the football team as superior to glee club. This re-establishes his status in the social hierarchy.

As the gay character on the TV show, Kurt battles periodically with his sexual identity in relation to his father. Though his father has offered support and love to his son after coming out to him, Kurt
feels disconnected from his father’s masculine and heterosexual identities. In an attempt to spend more
time with his crush, Finn, he sets up his father with Finn’s mother. Kurt’s dad instantly bonds with Finn
through their shared interests, which ultimately makes Kurt jealous. Kurt’s discourse of identity conflicts
with the discourse of heterosexism in this scenario and he begins questioning his sexuality after an
interaction with Sue Sylvester in the hallway.

Kurt: Something happened yesterday that really upset me. It’s my
dad. I love him and I’m afraid I might be losing him because of
my...sexuality.
Sue: Sexuality?...how old are you, sixteen? Have you even kissed a
boy?
Kurt: No.
Sue: Have you kissed a girl?
Kurt: No.
Sue: Well, then, how can you possibly know what you like. You see,
that’s the problem with your generation ... you’re obsessed with
labels. So you like show tunes? Doesn’t mean you’re gay. It just
means you’re awful. You know there’s only one person in this
world who can tell you what you are.
Kurt: Me.
Sue: No...me, Sue Sylvester. And she hasn’t quite made up her mind
about you.

In this segment, Sue’s comments show how she dismisses the idea that one can be attracted towards a
particular gender without a sexual experience. She uses the power discourse in this moment to dismiss
Kurt’s sexual identity.

The identity interplay between gender and sexuality is highlighted during the ninth episode,
Wheels. In this episode, Mr. Schuester denies Kurt an opportunity to sing Defying Gravity because the
“role is traditionally sung by a female.” During the episode, Kurt’s father receives a hate phone call at his
garage saying his son is a “fag.” Seeing how upset Kurt is, Kurt’s dad threatens to sue the school if his
son is not given an opportunity to try out for the part. During the “diva-off,” the show’s editors splice
the video and audio by panning behind the audience so that Kurt and Rachel merge as one throughout
the number, thus blurring the difference between a female and male voice. The song culminates on a
high F that Kurt throws to protect his father.

Kurt: Hey dad what are you doing? (Kurt’s dad, Burt, is fixing a tire in
his garage).
Burt: I’m making biscuits what does it look like I’m doing. How did the
tryout go?
Kurt: They gave the part to Rachel.
In this scene we see that Kurt is faced with a discourse of heterosexism that discriminates against his individual identity, thus also challenging his collective family identity. Using the discourse of agency, Kurt makes a choice to lose the solo part in order to protect his father and family from future discrimination. Kurt believes that his sexual identity is most exposed when it blurs the lines with gender, thus challenging the social hierarchy discourse. Being true to himself and his individual identity is important, but he must negotiate the discourse of heterosexism in order to restrict how the power discourse, i.e., discrimination, affects the ones he loves.

**Interpretations and Implications for the Field**

There have been very few extended representations of the intersection of music and classroom in popular media. *Glee* is one of the first to seemingly base its premise around a school music environment. *Glee* is about the dynamics and relationships of students and teachers. The show uses the musical numbers as a medium for expression of the characters, plot development, and maintaining interest. For music educators in real-life school settings, popularity of a show like *Glee* can be both positive and problematic. The show may promote participation in the arts, but is a misrepresentation of what music ensembles involve.
There are several implications for the field of music education based on our critical discourse analysis of *Glee*. First, the music classroom can offer social sanctuary for students who are marginalized in other settings within the school. Many students gain a sense of acceptance and self-confidence by participating in a music ensemble. Through the character of Kurt and others in Glee, we see literal and metaphorical use of voice. Kurt consistently sings songs written for female artists in his falsetto and feels comfortable and safe performing them. In this way, a student like Kurt, who is marginalized or rejected in mainstream social situations, can find his place in a school music environment.

The second implication we can take from the analysis of discourse in *Glee* is the dominance of a talent model within the school. Many of the characteristics and actions of characters in *Glee* indicate that a successful vocal ensemble depends on the recruitment of talent rather than the development of students’ abilities through the educative process. Mr. Schuester, the glee club director is employed as a Spanish teacher at McKinley High School. As a former member of the McKinley High School Glee Club, his qualifications to direct the ensemble are his own vocal and dance abilities. The teacher model in the show involves Mr. Schuester’s own self-promotion as he frequently performs numbers to demonstrate his own talent. He also shows that he can relate to his students through relevant, sometimes school-inappropriate music. Mr. Schuester is portrayed as a qualified show choir director in *Glee*, but in reality functions as a talent recruiter rather than a pedagogue. He seeks out members of the Cheerios, claiming that the team has all the best performers, and also recruits members from outside of the school to add to the talent of the club. We see, in the examples of social hierarchy, that talent equals power. Those who are acknowledged as talented singers are afforded far more opportunities than the other members of the glee club. Rather than seeing school as a place to develop student potential, McKinley students are stratified by the perceived degree of their talent, which is treated as both fixed and intrinsic. One irony of the show is that the glee club is promoted as a place in which every student has a voice, yet it is only the two leads, Rachel and Finn, who are predominantly heard. This has implications for music education because the talent model idealized in *Glee* challenges our predominant educational philosophy of music instruction for all students.

A third significant implication is glee club’s position within the structure of the school and community. Throughout the season, the glee club is consistently at risk of being cut. This theme is prevalent in the majority of the episodes of the first season and is perpetuated through the power
dynamics and social hierarchy of the school’s system. Principal Figgins grants power to Sue Sylvester because she brings money and media exposure through her highly competitive cheerleading squad, while glee club suffers weekly with threats of having their funding, space, schedule, and autonomy cut. Will and the glee club constantly have to fight or negotiate new terms to survive in the social hierarchy of the school. In *Glee*, we see representation of a social hierarchy enacted by a number of relationships between the stakeholders of the learning environment. Though these representations are intentionally crafted hyperbole, the images we see in the media, regardless of how unrealistic, can be influential to our thinking. When music education in any capacity is represented as consistently marginalized by the media, we run the risk of its status becoming permanently fixed in this position. Efforts of advocacy for comprehensive music education are thwarted by yet another media representation of music as inherently less important in schools as core subjects or high-revenue sports.

A final implication derived from the critical discourse analysis of *Glee* is the demonstration of music education as a product valuing enterprise, rather than process valuing enterprise. Within the context of the show, we see virtually no evidence of the process that is involved in learning music, building vocal technique, or even improving stage presence. While Mr. Schuester empowers his students to have voice and agency by helping them to select repertoire, there is no evidence of a teaching process in *Glee*. We see one brief example of vocal warm-ups during episode 19 that alludes to the notion of music learning. Also missing from the show is a model or mention of appropriate vocal pedagogy in the school music environment. This is seen in Kurt’s perpetual use of falsetto throughout the season. There is no indication from Kurt’s teacher, Mr. Schuester that his consistent use of falsetto to the exclusion of his full voice is inappropriate. A trained music teacher, concerned about the development of a male adolescent singer, should encourage that singer to develop his full vocal range and sing throughout his register (Sell, 2005). Kurt’s sole use of this range perpetuates the idea that his vocal habits and preferences are firmly established by the age of sixteen and that there is little room or need for him to grow as a vocalist. If a significant aim of education is to facilitate students’ musical growth and challenge personal limitations, Mr. Schuester may not be the model that best represents our practice. The 100% product model demonstrated in *Glee* leads to promotion of the following assumptions: 1) becoming a successful vocal ensemble does not require rehearsal that begins with learning individual vocal lines, and 2) the primary goals of ensemble singing are expressing oneself and being confident.
In this study we identified three primary discourses: power, identity, and agency. Each one of these discourses played out extensively throughout the season, often intersecting and conflicting with one another through social hierarchy and heterosexism. As one of the few television shows that is situated in a school music program, *Glee* provides a number of representations that impact our field. We explored three of these: 1) the music classroom as social sanctuary for students who are marginalized in other settings within the school; 2) the dominance of a talent model within the school music program; and 3) the demonstration of music education as a product valuing enterprise, rather than a process valuing enterprise.

This study was limited to analyzing the discourses in one particular media representation of a school music program. Other possible representations may exist in the future that may also demonstrate particular perceptions of music teaching and learning in our society. To this end, further research may lend itself to the following questions:

1) Has *Glee* or other representations of a music learning environment had an impact on the enrollment, attitude and expectations of show choir or glee club participants?

2) How do we, as music educators, address issues of power, identity, agency and marginalization?

3) How are social hierarchy and heterosexism enacted and/or (dis)privileged in our music classrooms?

By critically reflecting upon the ways in which power, identity, and agency are enacted in schools, practitioners can attend to issues of marginalization and recognize how language-in-use (dis)privileges certain ways of teaching and learning.
References


