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“Visibility and Ambivalence: Thoughts on Queer Institutionalization”

A Response to Nadine Hubbs

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Introduction

Weeks ago a message appeared in my email in-box from Nadine Hubbs. At the time, I was sifting through the day’s collection of messages and trying to prioritize those that constituted immediate action from the trivial end of semester fare. Nadine’s message was an anticipated response to my earlier query about the role I am assuming at this very moment. The gist of my message to Nadine was that I was getting ready to get ready to fashion a response to the tentative topic of keynote address at this historic conference, but that the real work would begin at semester’s end.

Among the first things that caught my eye when I starting reading her message was the title change from the address we experienced moments ago: Visibility and Ambivalence: Thoughts on Queer Institutionalization. Scanning further down Nadine’s message, I discovered the abstract succinctly written in a way the pleased my editor’s eye. And then one sentence stuck out: “[u]ndoubtedly music education has compelling reasons to institutionalize LGBT studies”. I liked this sentence so much I read a few more times before moving on to the rest of the abstract. I instinctively knew that Nadine had given me a lot to think about. This appealed to me because of my innate sense of skepticism. Plus the concept of identification was not settling well with my present understanding of LGBT/queer theory.

My next move was to locate the poster tapped to the outer office wall that heralded this conference to re-read the fine print. This time two sentences popped out: “[a]lthough numerous
disciplines have examined influences of the LGBT community, conventional music education has yet to examine as fully its research, theory, and practice from a LGBT perspective. Furthermore, within music education, LGBT issues are not visible via special research groups, journals, meetings, or research”.

Before my stated purpose of being here as responder to Nadine turns into a narrative project, here are some of the questions that immediately came to mind:

- What am I learning as a music teacher educator from work to overcome sexism, racism, and ableism in our profession?
- How would I use my response to the question just posed to guide efforts to establish a LGBT/queer identity in music education?
- In particular, what can I do to help others see that LGBT/queer identity is about people rather than a musical genre/style?
- What have we learned as a profession from misconstruing multicultural music education to mean the inclusion of so-called world music repertoire in the classroom rather than exploring the parameters of more culturally relevant music pedagogy?

These are some of the questions rattling around in my mind as I construct compelling reasons to institutionalize LBGT/queer studies. It would seem logical then that the remainder of my time before you would be devoted to sharing my answers to these questions. As you might expect, however, these questions have generated a web of others that would be impossible for me and us to answer today or ever with any real certainty. What I am able to do is share my current thoughts in relation to the questions generated from Nadine’s address.

Placement within Higher Education

As editor of one the profession’s leading research journals, I knew my energies would be dissipated by running the key terms gay, lesbian, LGBT and queer through the word search on the Council for Research in Music Education’s (CRME) website. I am willing to contend that this is true for other music education research journals without searching their databases.

My spirits were bolstered this year, however, by two groundbreaking documents drawn to my attention as editor: (1) a dissertation was nominated this fall for the 2008-2009 CRME Outstanding Dissertation Award and, (2) a chapter entitled “Dis-Orientations of Desire: Music Education Queer” by
Elizabeth Gould in *Music Education for Changing Times* (2009). The stories surrounding these projects are undoubtedly compelling and peak my need to know more from their inception to completion. How could the situation be otherwise?

I celebrate this moment to dare identify the papers accepted for this conference as LGBT/queer music education research. The presentation of these papers are trailblazing and a fitting match for the mission’s of the University of Maryland and the University of Illinois. But that leads me back to the (graphically appealing) poster. Namely, that “LGBT issues are not visible via special research groups, journals, meetings, or research” and, my own words, that are all situated within the space of higher education. What difference can this make in the lives of any LGBT students and teachers?

Nadine highlighted many of the good things about the institutionalized of LGBT people and scholarship at the University of Michigan and prompts us to consider what visibility might mean as we move from the margins to center in our colleges and universities. It is worth noting that Kristen Renn (2010) recently characterized higher education as “a strongly modernist system of organizations that contain LGBT/queer people but have not been transformed by the postmodern project. What is more non queer that traditional doctoral education or the tenure system? What says hierarchy and unitary structures more effectively than work units (departments) arranged by disciplines and colleges, ranked at some institutions according to their ability to procure federal and industry funds? In short, colleges and universities have evolved to tolerate the generation of queer theory from within but have stalwartly resisted the queering of higher education itself” (Renn, 2010, p.132).

Still, Renn contends that adoption of queer theory would promote greater understanding of LGBT issues in higher education. For example, queer theory could be applied to study problems and questions of access, equity, learning, and leadership. Socially constructed binaries such as teacher/learner, leader/follower, and research/practice could be researched through queer theoretical approaches. Perhaps queer theory could shed new light on decade’s old problems that remain unsolved in music education research.

But what about that sentence from Nadine’s abstract? You know the one--“[u]ndoubtedly music education has compelling reasons to institutionalize LGBT studies”. What about music education
research that chooses to use other theoretical models to explore the musical lives of LGBT students and teachers? What other theoretical models can guide our scholarship? Three recent projects came to mind: (1) Race and curriculum: Music in childhood education by Ruth Gustafson (2009); (2) Culturally relevant pedagogy as told in The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American Children (2009) by Gloria Ladson-Billings, and (3) Social justice and teacher education as profiled in a special issue of the Journal of Teacher Education (2010).

**Not all the blame on teachers and schools**

Ruth Gustafson (2009) acknowledges that her “focus on school music as a site of compliance and conflict in forming musical difference may appear, at first, to load the school and teachers with undeserved blame for the current situation” (p.xii). However, Gustafson clarifies throughout Race and curriculum: Music in childhood education “that curriculum and pedagogy derive from a broad array of racialist ideas and aesthetic tenets in music teaching. Making up the formal foundations of the field, these inscriptions of race have profound, dysconscious effects on the everyday task of the teacher. Her training, with all of the history of the field that implies, added to the conditions of schooling, inform the possibilities of her teaching (Gustafson, 2009, p.xii). What would happen if we substituted racialist with *heteronormative*? Would this be an appropriate substitution?

Of particular interest to me in light of our current focus on issues concerning LBGT students and teachers is Gustafson’s introduction of entrainment into the music education lexicon. The question of how music *entrains* each one of us is different ways is at the heart of her narrative. In it she states: “[w]hen I use the word *entrain*, I mean the way we react to music, with reference to the interaction of sound, memory, body motions, and gestures. These are sometimes beyond words, but they are the feelings and signs that link us to various tastes in music and social groups. Contemplating our own, or another’s, entrainment lets us into a world structured by cultural history and one that has its own intimate meanings. As individuals watch others, they interpret motions as familiar or strange, either like their own values or different from them” (p.xiii).

Many of us may share Gustafson’s observation that, “insofar as musical responses are understood as part of the modern self, each person harbors a sovereign sense of his own entrainment,
as much as over musical experience as over his language, carriage, and feelings. With the exception of mimicry, a subject that complicates the notion of subjective integrity in important ways, it is the child’s sense of sovereignty that counts her assent to, or withdrawal from, a musical activity” (Gustafson, 2009, p. xiii).

The notion of one’s entrainment is something I started giving quite a lot thought to as it might relate to LGBT persons. It also seemed to connect with my understanding of visibility management that refers to a range strategies used by gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth to regulate the degree to which their sexual identity is visible to others. Nonverbal strategies, in a case study conducted by Lasser & Wicker, included “the use of the body, gay cultural symbols, props, and silence as nonverbal visibility management behaviors to accomplish goals. For many students who engaged in the most restrictive visibility management, passing or acting straight was the goal” (2007, p.102).

- To what extent do entrainment and visibility management impact LGBT students and teachers?
- Might entrainment for LGBT students and teachers be more of an asset, whereas, it might be more of an obstacle for African American children?
- Music classes are frequently described as safer zones for LGBT students, while significant attrition rates are evident for African American students. How might entrainment and visibility management contribute to relative levels of participation in school music?

Potential of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

One might expect to find a fragment of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech quoted below the title of the first chapter of The Dreamkeepers (2009) by Gloria Ladson-Billings. Instead we find [w]hat happens to a dream deferred, the title of a favorite poem by Langston Hughes (who was definitely Black and arguably Gay).

*The Dreamkeepers* is described by Ladson-Billings as being “about teaching practice, not about curriculum” (p.13). She asserts that much of the purported reforms and the debate about our schools focused on curriculum: What should we teach? Whose version of history (music) should we offer? What priority should different subject matters be given? But it is the way we teach that profoundly affects the
way that students perceive the content of the curriculum” (p.13). That is the crux of culturally relevant pedagogy—“using student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture” (p.19).

While the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy is espoused in curriculum and instruction, we are also aware of the challenges that question the viability of this and other theories in classroom practice. For example, Sleeter and Delgado Bernal (2004) found that even when they worked with teachers who already embraced the ideals of critical pedagogy, they ended up dismissing it because they did not know what to do with in their classrooms.

In a qualitative study conducted by Evelyn Young (2010) to shed light on culturally relevant pedagogy in practice, she observed that “[n]ot enough is being done to extend ongoing support to practitioners who have accepted and are willing to implement scholarly theories into their pedagogy. Perhaps a more sustainable, more collaborative methodology is needed to support the teachers’ implementation of a theory into practice” (p.258). Young advocates for a more hands-on, more praxis-oriented, and a more collaborative model of research design that calls for inquiry-based discourse and iterative action and reflection to further support the work of teachers.

- Does the theory of a more culturally relevant music pedagogy have merit for pre service and in service LGBT students and teachers? What about the more general question of whether or not LGBT/queer is a culture?
- Is culturally relevant pedagogy a good fit with LGBT/queer studies?

Socially Just Teaching

“At a very simple level, general level, we can understand social justice by thinking about the opposite—injustice” according to Susan Chubbock (2010). She uses the following example to make her point: “an unjust society is one is which access to goods and opportunities deemed the essential human rights of the individual is limited or denied, with little or no recourse to rule of law or commonly held societal values... Even though strong disagreement about the meaning and implementation of the term social justice continues, few in this debate would argue in support of an unjust society, especially because the tenets of most major religions of the world include this view of justice. The rub, then,
comes not in questioning whether or not justice requires that all should experience fair and equitable access to essential human rights but in analyzing the cause of any unjust inequity and then, based on that cause, selecting an appropriate solution to create greater justice” (p.198). [Susan is a faculty member at Marquette University that is currently the embroiled in a controversy about withdrawing a contract to Jodi O’Brien.]

Yesterday, Elizabeth Gould made reference to *The Music Man* in her keynote presentation. Moments ago, Nadine used the line “something’s lost but something’s gained from living everyday” from Joni Mitchell’s *Both Sides Now*. These works were introduced in the 60s the same time Peter, Paul, and Mary started performing *If I Had Hammer*. I always find it intriguing when song lyrics are used metaphorically by authors, so the title *Social justice and teacher education: A hammer, a bell, and song* in a recent issue of the *Journal of teacher education* caught my eye. The authors caution (and so do I) that some might consider their use of this approach as “sentimental hogwash of typical White, middle-class, female teacher educators” and summarily describe how they are a pretty diverse bunch.

The general music teacher in me recalled sharing with my students that Pete Seeger and Lee Hays wrote *If I Had a Hammer* in post-WWII with the labor rights movement in mind, using three symbols associated with the workplace of the time: the hammer, the bell, and the song. The lyrics were intended to help the workers realize that they had everything their hands to bring about an equitable workplace: the laborers’ hammer could be transformed into the gavel of justice; the factory bell that marked the start and end of the long workdays could become the bell of freedom; and the songs that men, women, and children sang to lighten their loads could become songs about love and caring for one another.

Well, we have all three and the co-authors remind us of the tools at our disposal: Theories such as those I mentioned (LGBT/queer, culturally relevant pedagogy, and social justice) are the *hammers* we can use to break down and to construct. In order for this to happen, teacher educators must use the *bell* of freedom to send out a clear, consistent, and persuasive message that social justice is a foundational goal of American education, not an add-on to be addressed after academic standards are met. The beat of songs of teacher’s caring must accompany the work of teaching for social justice (Spalding, E., Klecka, C., Lin, E., Odell, S. & Wang, J., 2010).
At the risk of driving this [sappy] metaphor into oblivion, I’m going to stop with a question from the authors and a response from me: “is there a song about justice, freedom, and love that we can all sing together?” Undoubtedly maybe.

References


