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Challenges to Music Education: Curriculum Reconceptualized

By Betty Hanley and
Janet Montgomery

What do you think about when you hear the word *curriculum*? External expectations, the documented curriculum, the planned curriculum, the delivered curriculum, the attained curriculum, the hidden curriculum, everything that happens in schools? There is no shortage of definitions in the literature. In their influential book, Leonhard and House wrote that curriculum involves establishing educational outcomes and selecting appropriate learning experiences to help students achieve these outcomes.¹ In his book about contemporary music education, Mark described curriculum as teaching methods, materials, and tools.² Labuta and Smith defined curriculum in three ways: as skills—what students must be able to do; as knowledge—“what students must know as a result of schooling”; and as instructional methods—Orff, Kodály, Gordon, and so on.³ All of these writers reflect how curriculum has generally been conceptualized in music education.

These traditional ways of thinking about curriculum deal with the mechanics of teaching and assume that the way curriculum has been understood is working for students. In this traditional view, curriculum is a linear process involving development, implementation, and evaluation; its implementation is top-down and

*Societal changes
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curriculum in
new ways.*

special focus
Reconceptualizing Curriculum



Photo by Photospit.com

New technologies and ways of thinking about learning are shaping how music educators teach their students.

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Figure 1. A Comparison of Two Curriculum Paradigms

Traditional (Positivist) Curriculum	Reconceptualized Curriculum
Improvement	Quest for understanding
Hierarchy	Collaboration
Action and results	Inquiry
Focus on how	Focus on why
Right and wrong answers	Multiple answers
Prediction and control	Meaning
Practice and theory isolated	Practice and theory integrated
Teacher as implementer of someone else's ideas	Teacher as decision maker and researcher
Subject centered	Learner centered
Test driven	Performance driven

emphasizes policy, planning, and supervision. The curriculum has focused narrowly on classroom practice with the teacher implementing a curriculum that experts have developed. Students are at the bottom of the hierarchy. This way of thinking about curriculum is based on posi-

tivist assumptions (see figure 1). Is this view comprehensive enough? Does it meet the needs of a world that is rapidly changing, socially, economically, and culturally? Does it address recent discoveries about learning? The contributors to this special focus issue believe that it does not.

Reflection 1: A Music Teacher Reflects on Curriculum

I can honestly say that I never gave the generating of curriculum documents a single thought when I began teaching. The documents simply “existed.”

It wasn't until I took a course in curriculum that I ever really thought about what curriculum really is or how it reflects the ideological foundations upon which it is built. Now that I am more aware of the fact that curriculum is more than what, or even how, we teach, I am even more concerned about who ultimately decides what should go into a curriculum document.

Now, I think I am in a confusing place where no one has all the right answers. University-level theorists and researchers have a clear role to play in leading the way down the ideological and theoretical curricular path. District-level personnel need to be able to articulate the whole picture to the school board, which ultimately makes many of the budgeting decisions. Music teachers should have lots of opportunities to pilot and respond to proposed curriculum changes. In addition, music teachers should be consulted as to “best practice” in order to help avoid throwing the baby out with the bath water. Communities and parents should be consulted as to how they see music fitting into the overall community plan. What does the community value? And finally, students are perhaps the very best sources of best-practice data. Curricular decisions without learners at the center are bound to fail. Having said that, I have absolutely no idea how such a model should look. I am stymied as to how to involve all these stakeholders in a meaningful and productive conversation that ends with an improved music curriculum for the learners in British Columbia.

—Anne Thomson, elementary music teacher, Squamish, British Columbia

Societal Changes and Music Curriculum

A new view of curriculum that focuses on understanding practice and experience has been emerging, and curriculum is being reconceptualized (see figure 1). The idea of a reconceptualized curriculum started gaining momentum among educators in the 1980s, but not in music education. Indeed, music education has been slow to engage in a paradigm shift that has been rocking North America. This paradigm shift, which has been called postmodernism, is evident all around us in the disintegrating borders between disciplines and countries, the questioning of Western supremacy, the need to tolerate conflicting issues and perspectives, an acceptance of ambiguity, and a questioning of authority. We can see the influence of postmodernism in our films, books, art, and music, even though its definition is elusive. Indeed, “postmodernism rejects any effort to provide a single unified explanation of anything.”⁴ It has become woven into the very fabric of our lives. As society changes, postmodernism is confronting and challenging music education and the role of music teachers in North American society.

Postmodernism is evident in a number of questions related to music education. Should music education be teacher centered, subject centered, or learner centered? Should we focus on skill development or the development of musical understanding? Should we emphasize musical learning or cross-curriculum connections? Should we be trying to improve our students' musical tastes or welcoming the diverse kinds of music relevant in their lives? Whose interests should guide decision making? What is really going on in schools?

Increasingly, thinkers in music education are rejecting past practice as outdated in view of current knowledge about learning and irrelevant to contemporary children and youth. In critically examining music education as it is traditionally practiced, Regelski, for example, writes about the need to reject “methodolatry” and “taken-for-granted recipes” and avoid working

toward the “endullment” of students.⁵ Those are fighting words to many music educators who have developed successful programs using tried-and-true approaches. Why should we change? We have an “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” mentality that assumes we are accurately assessing the situation in our classrooms. We claim that music education is for all children, yet we have all heard that instrumental programs are elitist, that children start disliking music classes around fifth grade, that only a small percentage of students elect to take music classes once they can choose, and that students are bored with school music.⁶ In reflection 1, music teacher Anne Thomson reviews her own ideas about curriculum and the need for various stakeholders to be involved in making decisions about curricular change.

How might music educators cope with change? One possible direction to consider is constructivism, a theory of learning and knowing with the following characteristics:

- Knowledge and beliefs are formed within the learner.
- Learners personally imbue experiences with meaning.
- Learning activities cause learners to gain access to their experiences, knowledge, and beliefs.
- Learning is a social activity that is enhanced by shared inquiry.
- Reflection and metacognition are essential aspects of constructing knowledge and meaning.
- Learners play an essential role in assessing their own learning.
- The outcomes of the learning process are varied and often unpredictable.⁷

While it is relatively easy to write about change, change is rarely easy. In reflection 2, music teacher Catherine Bayley briefly discusses her own attempt to change her teaching practice. In reflection 3, Anne Thomson considers the political and cultural choices music teachers face every day in the music classroom. She is responding to a number of the issues that reconceptualized curriculum thinkers have raised.

Present and Future Challenges

Whether we are ready or not, post-modernism and its aftermath will

Reflection 2: A Music Teacher Reflects on Change

Even the small changes I made in my classroom indicated that constructivist practices do lead to more active, responsible learners who are able to achieve greater musical understandings. Students valued the opportunity to work collaboratively with their peers. Furthermore, this collaboration, and the shared learning that arose from it, created a desire in my students to become more actively involved in their own learning and work to the best of their ability. I learned that the teacher in the constructivist classroom must carefully monitor the amount of curricular material to cover because students require much more time to work collaboratively, access prior knowledge, reflect on and revise old and new ideas, and demonstrate their understandings in diverse ways.

—Catherine Bayley, elementary Orff music teacher, Delta, British Columbia

Reflection 3: A Music Teacher Reflects on Political and Cultural Issues

When I first began teaching twelve years ago, I was almost hyperaware of the need to be inclusive and culturally unbiased. I went out of my way to include music from “other” cultures and steer away from Christian-based musical selections. For example, at Christmas time, I would call my concerts “Winter Celebrations,” and I would not include any pieces that directly referenced the Christian celebration. Then I became aware that I was neglecting many wonderful musical works simply because they might represent a “majority” view. I slowly began to choose musical works based on specific musical elements that I deemed appropriate for our current program of study. In retrospect, I think what actually changed was my criteria for inclusion: the focus switched from a political or socially based set of criteria to a more academic, elemental basis for selection. Now I am somewhere in between. The bottom line for including a piece of music or body of musical work in my classroom curriculum is that I must have firsthand, authentic, contextual, cultural, and historical information about the piece. I will no longer include a song from Nigeria or a sacred oratorio by Handel without knowing (from what I deem to be a reliable source) how that piece fits into the cultural and historical fabric of the society where it originated. I still fear being guilty of appropriation or exclusion, but at least I am more consciously aware of the criteria I use to choose music in my classroom.

—Anne Thomson, elementary music teacher, Squamish, British Columbia

issue many challenges to music education in the twenty-first century. In the four articles that follow, the authors address some of these challenges in three contexts:

- Curriculum and school practice (questioning school-based curriculum)
- Curriculum and cultural issues (asking whose knowledge to address and how)
- Curriculum and political issues (asking whose ideas will prevail)

Janet Barrett begins this special focus issue by questioning our traditional ways of thinking about curriculum in music and providing a framework for approaching music education from a reconceptualized perspective. In the next article, also addressing curriculum and school practice, Lucy Green examines the gap between in-school and out-of-school music experiences in a study of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds’ responses to constructivist-type classroom experiences. She

Suggested Reading

- Blaukopf, Kurt. *Musical Life in a Changing Society*. Translated by David Marinelli. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1992.
- Brooks, Jacqueline Grennen, and Martin G. Brooks. *In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1993.
- Davis, Brent, Dennis Sumara, and Rebecca Luce-Kapler. *Engaging Minds: Learning and Teaching in a Complex World*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000.
- Duckworth, Eleanor Ruth. "The Having of Wonderful Ideas" and Other Essays on Teaching and Learning. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996.
- Fosnot, Catherine Twomey. *Constructivism: Theory, Perspective, and Practice*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996.
- Hanley, Betty, and Thomas W. Goolsby, eds. *Musical Understanding: Perspectives in Theory and Practice*. Victoria, BC: Canadian Music Educators Association, 2002.
- Hanley, Betty, and Janet Montgomery, "Contemporary Curriculum Practices and Their Theoretical Bases." In *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, edited by Richard J. Colwell and Carol Richardson, 113–43. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Jorgensen, Estelle J. *Transforming Music Education*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003.
- Pinar, William F. "Understanding Curriculum: An Introduction." In *Understanding Curriculum*, edited by William F. Pinar and others, 3–65. New York: Peter Lan, 1995.
- Wiggins, Jackie. *Teaching for Musical Understanding*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2001.

proposes a stronger link between cultural practice and music education. Peter Dunbar-Hall explores similar issues when he examines how learning and teaching music should be grounded in the cultural practice of the music being studied. Finally, Roger Rideout concludes this special focus issue by examining the political agenda represented in selecting content for music classes. The authors were chosen because they bring diverse interests and approaches and an international perspective to the discussion.

The point of view taken by the four contributing authors is that, as a profession, we need to examine and act on the questions reconceptualized curriculum thinkers raise. We offered a number of choices earlier in this introduction. The resources in the Suggested Reading sidebar offer additional food for thought. What are the answers that will make music education relevant and meaningful to our students and society? At the very least, we owe it to our students to question our practice. The task will not be easy, but no one who is faint of heart ever became a music teacher.

Notes

1. Charles Leonhard and Robert W. House, *Foundations and Principles of Music Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959).
2. Michael L. Mark, *Contemporary Music Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schirmer, 1986).
3. Joseph A. Labuta and Deborah A. Smith, *Music Education: Historical Contexts and Perspectives* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 57.
4. David J. Elliott, "Modernity, Postmodernity, and Music Education," *Research Studies in Music Education* 17 (2001): 34.
5. Thomas A. Regelski, "Critical Theory and Praxis: Professionalizing Music Education," <http://www.nyu.edu/education/music/mayday/maydaygroup/papers/crittheoryrev.htm>.
6. Malcolm Ross, "What's Wrong with School Music," *British Journal of Music Education* 12 (1995): 185–201.
7. Deborah Walker and Linda Lambert, "Learning and Leading Theory: A Century in the Making," in *The Constructivist Leader*, edited by Linda Lambert and others (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995), 17–19. ■

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MENC Resources

The following MENC publications offer more information about music curriculum. For more information, visit www.menc.org or call 1-800-336-3768.

- Boardman, Eunice. *Dimensions of Musical Learning and Teaching: A Different Kind of Classroom*. Reston, VA: MENC, 2002. Helps music educators structure classroom environments that engage students in thinking musically. Item #1082.
- Mark, Michael L., and Charles L. Gary. *A History of American Music Education*. 2nd ed. Reston, VA: MENC, 1999. Offers an overview of American music education and how it has changed over the years. Item #1507.
- MENC Task Force for National Standards in the Arts. *The School Music Program: A New Vision*. Reston, VA: MENC, 1994. Provides a blueprint for a music curriculum using the National Standards. Item #1633. Free online version available at <http://www.menc.org/publication/books/prek12st.html>