1

Defining Ourselves as Other: Envisioning Transformative Possibilities

Cathy Benedict

> Outsider is commonly the term used to describe people new to a place or people who do not know the ways of a place. The use of the term outsider indicates that a person does not properly understand the behavior expected of people in a town, region, or nation. Outsiders are often despised and suspected of being troublemakers. They are people "out of place." (Cresswell, 1996, pp. 25–26)

Many music teachers see urban settings as placements of desperation. They see only the difficulties; they see urban schools as places where "quality" music programs don't stand a chance. There are the usual suspects: the apparent larger-than-life behavioral problems, parental noninvolvement issues, and cultural tensions, as well as the perceived lack of skills and understandings children bring to the classroom. The list feels endless and efforts seem futile.

We might benefit from considering the reasons such negative images have become embedded in our consciousness. While these issues may be very real, it is good in any educative situation to address assumptions. Chief among those that we must consider when examining urban education is the notion of *who we are* as teachers and whether our beliefs and assumptions somehow perpetuate these perceived "problems" in urban music education. I am suggesting that we challenge ourselves to see these issues not as "givens," but as situations that had and have human agency.

In taking on this challenge, we might ask ourselves whether we have played a role in creating and perpetuating these situations. Of course, none of us seeks to do this directly, but we must continually remind ourselves that "larger social and economic factors . . . impinge on individuals' lives and their life chances" (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 106). The title of this chapter suggests that seeing ourselves as the "other," or the outsider, rather than the *savior*, or the bearer of "correct" culture and cultural understanding, will better enable us to engage in transformative possibilities.

So—What does it mean to see ourselves as "other," and what does this have to do with transformation? All of us "know" that music education needs to "fight" for its rightful place of legitimacy within a curriculum. Who has time for transformation when our efforts need to be channeled toward advocacy? Who has time for transformation when we are teaching "children who have never known the joy of having music in their lives, [giving] them a gift that they will never forget" (Reninger, 2004)?

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the ways in which the particular geographical situatedness of the urban school contributes to the ways music educators, administrators, researchers, and policy makers envision their positions and engage with students. Of particular interest are those engagements that view students as bereft of culture, musical experiences, and lacking in "appropriate skills." I mean to suggest that an educative process that focuses on a very particular model of cultural transmission and method actually serves to punish our students—rather than celebrate diversity—to negate the very cultures they bring to our classrooms and lives. Ultimately this process serves to punish us as well, preventing opportunities for all of us to experience community, to engage in reciprocal experiences that will allow the eradication of "otherness."

THE TAKEN-FOR-GRANTEDNESS OF THE URBAN SETTING AND "OTHER"

How did urban education become the last refuge of desperation? Why have urban settings become almost synonymous with troubled students and difficult teaching situations? Certainly *someone* is responsible. The easiest person to blame is the student, particularly the "type" of student who may attend urban schools. Many of these schools had past "glory days" in which most students graduated and went off to college: some to become statesmen, scholars, even Nobel laureates. This was expected and even considered "normal" behavior and yet now, urban schools often struggle just to retain students.

Cresswell writes, "The geographical setting of actions plays a central role in defining our judgment of whether actions are good or bad" (1996, p. 9).

The ramifications of this statement are vast and circular. The geographical setting of the urban school contributes to the ways we see our students. This setting consequently affects how we see ourselves, including the ways in which we engage in pedagogy, curriculum development, assessment practices, research, and eventually policy. While our actions are mostly well intended, unless we question how "society" defines terms such as *at risk*, *disadvantaged*, and *culture*, the ramifications of these assumptions—often set in play by the geographical setting—cloud our actions. If we allow them to go unexamined, we end up ascribing very particular meanings to what we think of as music, culture, and our practice. We need to step back and check whether our assumptions about students—differences in their perceptions of discipline and of structure, differences between their sense of order and our own—stem from our particular dominant status quo experiences. Do we assume students "should" behave in certain ways because those are the expectations from our own culture?

Cresswell continues: "But value and meaning are not inherent in any space or place—indeed, they must be created, reproduced, and defended from heresy" (1996, p. 9). Heresy, false doctrine—We work very hard to defend and advocate our particular culture from these things. Seeing our students as "others" allows us to define ourselves as "out of place" in the urban setting, *their* setting. Doing so enables us not only to abdicate responsibility for actions that perpetuate a system of dominance and social injustice, but also to perpetuate a version of "in place," *our* setting, confident of our well-meaning, yet unexamined mission. Is it this power, this ability to "make the rules" and define what appropriate behavior is and is not in a classroom and society, that we are convinced we must defend?

Were each of us—music educators, researchers, administrators, and policy makers—to take on this task of seeing ourselves as "other" (or, more importantly, realizing that there is no "other"), we might begin to see the ways in which we take for granted our ability to move in and out of the urban setting with ease. This might make us be more willing to take on the responsibility for challenging a system of assumptions, oppression, and injustice. In this case heresy would become the act of *not* challenging assumptions. Clearly, contemplating the transformative possibilities of urban settings is a complicated journey as we examine this sense of "otherness" from many perspectives.

The National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force (2004) sifted through the statistics collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) and came up with some rather powerful facts, one of which is that 90% of American public school teachers are White, while 40% of students are of color. While the term *White* is problematic in itself, this statistic suggests that *White* teachers work regularly in settings in which they are the minority—the other. Does this matter? Well, it does and it does not. And

while it may seem easy and obvious to go with the "it does not" answer, this assumption, gone unchecked, can become the foundation for a pedagogy of neglect.

> Typically, white middle-class perspective teachers have little or no understanding of their own culture. Notions of whiteness are taken for granted. They are rarely interrogated. But being white is not merely about biology. It is about choosing a system of privilege and power. (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 96)

The commonness of Whiteness in our society spawns a culture in which the experiences of the White teacher become the normative yardstick by which to measure all experience. A recent study by Mazzei (2004) considered the ways White teachers regarded their "racial identity." Mazzei found that even when they were the minority population in schools, White teachers continued to see their experiences as "normative" and those of their students as "other" (p. 26). This inability to see Whiteness as a particular positioning and privilege in society "coupled with a cultural taboo learned early by many Whites that it is impolite not notice color or differences, produces silences that are meaning-full" (p. 30).

THE DEFICIT MODEL

Some educators choose to view the problems of urban education as a collection of perceived deficits that students bring to the classroom. This includes an assumption that students are lacking in the skills and knowledge that are "necessary" to succeed in schools. Unfortunately, framing the problems of urban schooling, choosing to examine students and their environments (including parent and communities) from a deficit model serves to negate the possibility of realizing the potential of each student.

We must consider whether the deficit model allows (or perhaps even encourages) blame to be placed on the students for the difficulties that arise in urban settings. We must likewise be cautious about using words such as *underprivileged*, *disadvantaged*, *deprived*, *neglected*, and even *poor*. What does it mean when music teacher educators frame issues of urban education through the deficit model, when novice teachers learn to see urban settings as places of "warfare," and see their pedagogical training as preparation for "survival in the trenches"? These poor choices of language, coupled with a profound lack of knowledge of cultural practices and parental issues, sets up a "safe" and seemingly immutable barrier between "us" and "them." While these particular practices may seem innocuous, left unexamined they are at best unhelpful and at worst deceitful and even insidious.

Allowing our thought processes to be framed with a deficit-based analysis

lets us forget, as Ladson-Billings reminds us, the "larger social and economic factors that impinge on individuals' lives and their life chances" (2001, p. 106). Using descriptors such as *underserved*, rather than *underprivileged*, helps to place the responsibility back on those who have privilege in this world, and forces us to consider that we are complicit in the larger and social and economic factors that are impinging on our students' lives. A student of Ladson-Billings once pointed out that our assumptions are often sifted through the expectations of a "Western philosophy toward education" (p. 199). In a similar fashion, music educators often "expect" students to behave in certain ways, to come from certain kinds of home environments, and to lack the specific experiences that will prepare them for "our" music education agenda. The deficit model may also obfuscate the cultural differences between the ways that families from different cultures address the educative system.

> Some teachers assume that the "right" way for students and their parents to respond to school is the way they (and their parents) responded to school. When parents fail to come to school and participate in school activities, teachers may assume that the parents don't care about education. Teachers (like all of us) may attribute meanings to parents' and students' behaviors that are incorrect (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 83).

Malia'iaupuni, a spokesperson for the native peoples of the Hawaiian Islands, addresses the deficit model in this way: "deficits-based approaches often miss the expertise that exists in our communities and families, viewing instead outside experts as the only ones capable of 'fixing' our problems" (2004, p. 29). Rather than thinking of us as experts, Malia'iaupuni calls on us as teachers to draw on the strengths of each individual. She challenges us to create a "positive space for greater voice and empowerment of a marginalized collective" (p. 29). So for music educators, it isn't just a matter of including a "broad range of genres, styles, and periods, including music from outside the art music traditions, music from the various cultures from the various musical cultures of the world" (MENC, 1994, pp. 3–4). The challenge is in examining our assumptions and situations and creating a "space for greater voice and empowerment" so that, as Malia'iaupuni reminds us, we may be better able to "challenge sociocultural and political processes of domination" (2004, p. 30).

COLOR-BLIND TEACHING AND THE PEDAGOGY OF NEGLECT AND IRRELEVANCY

Cultural aversion is the reluctance of teachers and administrators to discuss race and race-related issues like ethnicity, culture, prejudice,

equality, and social justice. This color-blind philosophy is linked to edu-
cators' uncomfortableness in discussing race, their lack of knowledge of
the cultural heritage of their students and the students' peers, and their
fears and anxieties that open consideration of differences might incite
racial discord or perhaps upset a fragile, often unpredictable, racial har-
mony. (Jordan Irvine, 1991, p. 26)

I would imagine that each of us came to the teaching force wanting to
teach "all kinds" of students. The alternative suggests a person none of us
wants to be, or even to associate with. No teacher comes to the profession
with the intention to create situations that would be disrespectful and "incite
racial discord." However, those meaning-full silences that Mazzei discovered
around the racial identity of people of privilege can render us incapable of
considering the ways in which color-blind pedagogy plays out in music edu-
cation—ways that might seem incomprehensible, a pedagogy that in fact

denies the legitimacy of students' heritage and race and often contributes to a
cycle of misunderstanding that leads to unstated and unvented hostility between
teachers and students, which often results in more misunderstanding and con-
frontations (Jordan Irvine, 1991, p. 27).

Each of us has been "schooled" on the importance of addressing diversity
and multiculturalism in our classrooms. MENC (1994) has been at the fore-
front of articulating this mission:

The music studied should reflect the multimusical diversity of America's plural-
istic culture. It should include a broad range of genres, styles, and periods,
including music from outside the art music traditions, music from the various
cultures form the various musical cultures of the world. (pp. 3–4)

To suggest that music education does not reflect multiculturalism, or to
deny the presence of music educators at the forefront of the multiculturalism
movement—as defined by varied repertoire and cultural contexts—would be
nonsense. And yet, in our music classrooms, how do we address the physical
characteristics of race? In what ways has our "color-blind" philosophy pre-
vented us from truly engaging in a process of multiculturalism? As Jordan
Irvine points out, color-blind teaching has devastating effects when allowed
to go by unexamined. It is worth quoting her at length:

By ignoring students' most obvious physical characteristic, race, these teachers
are also disregarding students' unique cultural behaviors, beliefs, and percep-
tions—important factors that teachers should incorporate, not eliminate, in
their instructional strategies and individualized approaches to learning. When
teachers ignore students' race and claim that they treat all children the same,

they usually mean that their model of the ideal student is white and middle-class and that all students are treated as if they are or should be both with and middle-class. Such treatment contributes to perceptions of inferiority about black culture and life and to denial and self-hatred by black children. (1991, p. 54)

The implications of these words are powerful. And while as music teachers, it almost seems that we are above these accusations, the question of how we treat our students in our classes remains. How do we "incorporate . . . instructional strategies and individualized approaches to learning" to recognize and challenge structures of oppression, to acknowledge "students' unique cultural behaviors"?

Some of us rely on a method of teaching music: Orff, Kodály, Gordon, Suzuki. We may believe that when we "teach to" the standards as discrete units, so as to check them off a list, we are relying on a particular method of teaching. We find comfort in the fact that these methods enable us to teach each of our students fairly and equally, to treat everyone identically. Could it be that this reliance on method renders us blind to the differences in our students? Is our understanding of Western music "as a universal language'" actually an attempt to assimilate our students into "our" musical culture—albeit with the inclusion of diverse musics and cultural contexts? Valenzuela, addressing the Mexican American population in the United States notes that

Students' cultural world and their structural position must also be fully apprehended, with school-based adults deliberately bringing issues of race, difference, and power into central focus. This approach necessitates abandoning the notion of a color-blind curriculum and a neutral assimilation process" (1999, p. 109).

How can music educators use this pedagogical stance of questioning, challenging issues of power and inferiority, as suggested by Valenzuela, Ladson-Billings, and others? How does this differ from believing that our purpose as educators is to "give our students a leg up on life"? How does thinking of our students as "less fortunate" people who have never known the joy of music in their lives serve to fulfill the MENC goal that the primary purpose of music education is "to improve the quality of life for all students by developing their capacities to participate fully in their musical culture" (1994, p. 2)? How does a repertoire of diverse music and the examination of the cultural context really address each of our students and their structural positioning in the world? And finally, is any of this multiculturalism? Ladson-Billings (2001) reminds us:

"Helping the less fortunate" can become a lens through which teachers see their role. Gone is the need to really help students become educated enough to

develop intellectual, political, cultural, and economic independence. Such an approach to teaching diverse groups of students renders their culture irrelevant. (p. 82)

Thus, it is not enough to simply ''reflect the multimusical diversity of America's pluralistic culture'' (MENC, 1994, pp. 3–4). Music educators, administrators, researchers, and policy makers must accept the challenge to look beyond the idea of ''improving the quality of life'' and address the political and structural positioning of our students so that transformative experiences are not only musically, but socially oriented.

Seeing ourselves as rescuers, and the urban setting—the students and their cultures—as deficits, impedes our interpretation of liberation, which comes only when all persons engage in actions that move them toward a fuller humanity and social justice. This is a transformative process, just as multiculturalism is a process, rather than a noun or an adjective (Sleeter, 2002). Banks and Banks (2004) define multiculturalism as

A reform movement designed to change the total educational environment so that students from diverse racial and ethnic groups, both gender groups, exceptional students, and studies from each social-class will experience equal educational opportunities in schools, colleges, and universities. A major assumption of multicultural education is that some students, because of their particular racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural characteristics, have a better chance of succeeding in educational institutions as they are currently structured than do students who belong to other groups or who have different cultural and gender characteristics. (p. 451)

Including diverse musics is an important first step, as is contextualizing those musics. But just teaching about differences is not enough. . . . there is another critical step. We must also allow and encourage stories to be told. Pedagogy that leads toward societal transformation requires opportunities for these stories and narratives to take place in all classes including performing ensembles, general music, and even music theory. Such stories might include discussions of those whose voices and musics are missing, as well as reasons why certain composers and musics have been privileged. The stories must be enmeshed with the constant narrative of what it means to understand diverse musics and cultures, and consideration of whether we can ever fully understand cultures that differ from our own.

This means taking on habits of mind that will allow us to ask difficult questions such as these: Which students are not being served in our programs and how are we complicit in that arrangement? How do our word choices prevent social transformation? And most importantly, How can I continually question my own assumptions so that I may help my students question theirs?

These kinds of questions lead toward what Ladson-Billings refers to as ''culturally relevant pedagogy'': a pedagogy that is based on ''student achievement, cultural competence and a sense of sociopolitical consciousness'' (2001, p. 144). We must consider whether a ''color-blind'' approach to teaching music negates the goal of cultural relevance and even serves to perpetuate models of oppression. We must examine the temptation to think that we can address deeper and systemic issues of oppression simply by including a diverse repertoire of music. Will relying on the belief that music is a ''universal language'' magically wipe away all differences and create the coveted level playing field? Students can certainly identify with music of their cultures, and even differences in music. Yet how much more profound if they can affiliate their life experiences with issues and situations that are addressed in the curriculum, thus becoming tied more closely to the goals of a socially and ideologically aware music curriculum.

LINGERING QUESTIONS

The lingering question that hovers over all that we do is the purpose of music education. There are at least two parts to this question: the musical purpose and the larger, societal purpose that addresses the ways we engage with others to broaden the ideal of ''quality of life.'' An examination of this larger purpose begins with each of us individually. We must consider our methods; there are serious limitations inherent in following a method that does not allow us to know and see each child for who they are. Rather than accepting the idea that our lives are predestined by cultural differences, we need to find ways to acknowledge and make sense of how our students live in the world. As such we need to be mindful of believing that our worldview is the only worldview and be wary of this particular positioning of power.

> Indeed, in the educational institutions of this country, the possibilities for poor people and for people of color to define themselves, to determine the self each should be, involve a power that lies outside of the self. It is others who determine how they should act, how they are to be judged. When one ''we'' gets to determine standards for all ''wes,'' then some ''wes'' are in trouble! (Delpit, 1995, p. xv)

On multiple levels, music teacher ''wes'' ought to take this missive to heart. Too often others outside the discipline have been allowed to define who we are and what we can be. As a result, an inordinate amount of our time and effort is spent on advocacy. How can we take control of our own reality and advocate policy that allows us to do what we do best; that is, to enable all persons to define and express who they are? Can we construe

advocacy as something bigger than standards and trappings of arts education? We are positioned to address the broader educative goal of democratic inquiry and critique. Transformation, however, begins with who we are and the assumptions we bring to any educative setting.

In January of 1970, *Music Educators Journal* devoted an entire issue to a special report called "Facing the Music in Urban Education." In bold letters, music educators were told that an "educational revolution is underway," in which the "front lines are the ghetto schools." The bold declaration continued with wartime metaphors, suggesting "command headquarters" and "combat troops," language that has evolved only slightly in the 35 years since its publication. It is a difficult volume to read through. On the one hand, we can be comforted by the progress we have made. But comparing the 1970s "lingo" of that issue with that of the current era tells us how much farther we need to go.

The title of this chapter suggests that we should learn to see ourselves as "other." The real need, however, is not to see our students or ourselves as outsiders, but rather to "come to see that everybody is cultural and multicultural" (Erickson, 2004, p. 55). If our primary purpose as music educators is to improve the quality of life for all students, then taking on transformative pedagogy to advocate for social change, rather than relying on methodologies that suggest that the universal language of music transcends all, would enable us not only to develop our students' capacities to participate fully in their musical cultures, but our own capacities to transform culture as well.

REFERENCES

Banks, C., & Banks, J. (Eds.) (2004). *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Cresswell, T. (1996). *In place/out of place: Geography, ideology, and transgression.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom.* New York: The New Press.

Erickson, F. (2004). Culture in Society and in Educational Practices. In C. Banks & J. Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Fowler, C. (Ed.). (1970). Special Report. *Music Educators Journal*, 56(5), 90.

Jordan Irvine, J. (1991). *Black students and school failure: Policies, practices, and prescriptions.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2001). *Crossing over to Canaan: The journey of new teachers in diverse classrooms.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Malia'iaupuni, S. (2004). Ka'akalai Ku Kanaka: A call for strengths-based approaches from a Native Hawaiian perspective. *American Educational Research Association*, 33(9), 29–36.

Mazzei, L. (2004). Silent Listenings: Deconstructive practices in discourse-based research. *American Educational Research Association*, 33(2), 21–30.

Reninger, R. (2004) Setting your sights on the inner city—The joys and challenges of urban music education, *MENC Collegiate NewsLink, December2004*. Retrieved from www.menc.org/networks/collegiate/newslink/archives/04dec/December 2000Newslink. html on July 7, 2005.

Sleeter, C. (2002). Rethinking our schools. Retrieved from www.rethinkingschools .org/archive/15_02/Int152.shtml on September 1, 2005.

Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany: State University Press of New York.