

Policy, Narrativity, and the Representation of Reality

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Abstract: This article examines the policy implications embedded in the questions asked by music educators that frame the historical progress and evolution of music education. Further, this article posits that while these questions have seemingly worked toward solutions to problems, they have systematically preserved the inequalities we intended to dismantle. Consequently, this article investigates the complexity and contradictions embedded in history and policy beyond vague notions of linear progression. I suggest that the narrativization of music education has made us subjects in a process that not only works against “musicking,” but also reproduces hierarchies and disparity.

Keywords: history, narrative, policy, reproduction

Those who determine who will have the right, the power, and authority to say what correct speech is and those who attempt to name correct speech, in other words, to legislate it, are always authoritarian. (Domanska, Kellner, and White 1994, 96)

In a 1932 article from the *Music Supervisors' Journal*, Edward Birge summarized the nascent twenty-five year history of the Music Supervisors National Conference (MSNC). He included in his account a list of topics, generated

at the organization's first formal conference in 1907, to be considered for future discussion. Among the pragmatic concerns on this list of “topics recommended for discussion” is the teaching of pitch and rhythm, the use of syllables and correct musical terms, and “what should be done for monotones.” Other issues include whether educators should “teach exercises or music,” a call for “Uniform Versions of Patriotic Songs,” and “How to Deal with Balky Teachers, Balky Boys, Grading Pupils, Unmusical Teachers and Children” (21). Although all of these matters indirectly influence policy considerations, several other questions address policy directly:

What should the music course of study include? What should we expect of the music supervisors of the twentieth century? What should be especially emphasized in the State Normal Schools? How shall we make music a required study in the schools of the State? (Birge 1932, 21)

Although we no longer speak of boys or teachers as “balky” or refer to those who cannot distinguish between pitches as “monotones,” this list remains relevant. What is particularly interesting is that Birge reminded his 1932 readers that this list of topics had been compiled from the 1907 *School Music Monthly* and added (with remarkable prescience and more than a hint of admonishment), “It is worthy of note that some of these topics are *still*

being ‘discussed’” (21, emphasis added).

Indeed, it is worthy of note that these topics are still being addressed in the twenty-first century without much change in language or circumstance. Certainly, this is not a revelation for anyone in this field, and perhaps there is nothing inherently wrong in the questions themselves. But might the continual focus on these questions have precluded other questions from being pursued? What if, for over one hundred years, the history of music education has been so dictated by and dedicated to answering these questions that we have not recognized moments of discontinuity or ruptures in the “success” story of music education? What if the kinds of questions that are asked—the questions that frame the historical progress and evolution of our discipline—have always been intertwined with policy? What if these questions, while seemingly moving toward solutions to problems, have simply reproduced systematic policies of misrecognition and preserved the very inequalities we hoped to dismantle? What if they have produced, in essence, policies that guarantee misrecognition?¹

History as a Framework

Some policies are set by the force of tradition, others by decisions not to think, but rather to act using one or more ideas or techniques that seem to be working at a given time. (Hope 2002, 11)

Hope has written that policy is “a decision about how to proceed, based in part on knowledge or research and in part on values and opinions” (2002, 11). In this article, I argue that today’s overriding problem is the way in which values and, more particularly, the value of music education, have been presented or narrativized. I suggest that this narrativized history has been created by people who have a particular stake in an agenda that does not focus on the use-value of musicking² in today’s world. We need to recognize the implications of this process of narrativization, such as the ways in which it has served others’ interests, prevented music educators from exploring broader possibilities of musicking within the formal process of schooling, and delineated and determined community music engagements.

Toward this end, I use as a starting point Hope’s 2002 articulation of forces such as “aspirations, content, expert and lay personnel, organizational structure, funding patterns and many other elements” that are continually “at work developing ideas and values in society as a whole” (11). I extend this discussion by considering how those ideas and values are constructed before, during, and after policy engagements. Hope asserts that these ideas and values are “constituted and reconstituted into policy frameworks that wield powerful influences on decision making” (11), and he suggests that we ought to be mindful of these frameworks and “act with more sophistication about what these frameworks mean” (14). Values are always presented to us in such a way that, as Nietzsche writes, “people have taken the value of these ‘values’ as given, as factual, as beyond all questioning” (2006, 393). The values embedded in our utility, such as when music is used toward ends that are not musical, often come from others outside of music education, and we rarely consider the source and development of these values or what worth these values have, for whom, and to what end. It is imperative to investigate how these values are established and how they become *prima facie* assumptions that dictate development, change, transformation, identity, and musicking. Therefore, with the help of Hope, Foucault,

Nietzsche, Bourdieu, White, and others, this article investigates invisible and hidden forces, as well as the complexities and contradictions embedded in history, and thus policy, which leads us forever forward. I posit that the narrativization of music education has made us subjects in a process that not only works against musicking, but has at its core a “constellation of forces” that is more interested in reproducing hierarchies—and thus disparities—than in dismantling the status quo music educators should seek to challenge.

Foucault believed that the pursuit of a mythical origin was misleading, and that the real concern ought to be with how subjects are formed by history. In the case of music education, we have been misled by a narrative bound by a beginning point that has determined our trajectory. Rather than writing our history as if it were already established, Poster suggests the need to be more sophisticated and interrogate the fundamental assumption that we have pursued our “self interest . . . rationally” (1997, 16). This article calls attention to the problematics of the accepted story of music education to “enable us to perceive the complex, relational nature of ideas or entities that appear to the undialectical eye as simple or self-contained” (Heilbroner 1980, 36). Attending to the policy implications and assumptions embedded in the often deterministic unfolding of our history is one way to illuminate the given facts that have set into motion a particular narrativization of our history.

What role does policy play in how the events of our history have been narrativized? Certainly there are many events and “discreet and apparently insignificant truths” (Nietzsche, qtd. in Foucault 1984, 77) to which our narration has not paid attention. We must consider how choices have been made that not only constitute our history, but also construct the trajectory of our future. Attending to what White calls the research phase of history is one thing; events take place, are chronicled, and are recorded. But without a narrative that is formally structured and morally ordered, these events stand alone, and thus are often meaningless. It is in the next phase, in which one chooses and strings together selected

events and submits them for record, that policy becomes a central concern.

On the Narrativization of Music Education in the United States

History, it has been said, is a sign of the modern, and subsistence “without history” or “on the margins of history” was long a metonymic sign of backwardness and a pretext and justification for colonial occupation. . . . A somewhat less noted fact is that an excess of historical invocation—or a historical obsession—is a diagnostic sign of failed modernities. (Lomnitz 2008, 39)

In order to consider the narrativized history of music education as a policy framework, it is necessary to distinguish between a narrated history and a narrativized history. White (1987) suggests that in the former, events are simply reported; although the historian still chooses which events to report, there is no attempt to mold the events into a story. On the other hand, in a narrativized history, a structure is imposed with “well-marked beginning, middle, and end phases” (White 1987, 2). As a result, the pull between what is real and what is desired is melded into a discourse that “feigns to make the world speak itself” (2). Thus, when I refer to the narrativized history of music education, I do not speak of particular events that have taken place in music education. Rather, I speak of the way our history has been presented so that these events seem not only to speak for themselves, but already seem established. Governing organizations—and, by extension, their journals, news articles, and news releases—have narrativized the events of music education. I posit that “the structure for [this] historical development” (Lomnitz 2008, 41) has been driven by the romantic narrative of the “drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he is imprisoned by the Fall” (White 1975, 9).

Despite the widespread acknowledgment that we live in a postmodern world of multiple narratives, we frequently do not recognize that our tendency toward binary positioning and rhetoric (e.g., the triumph of good over evil, virtue over vice, light

over darkness) reproduces larger structural and privileged narratives that dictate, among other ways of being and knowing, policy decisions. Of course, these romantic narratives beg to be questioned and, indeed, seem to no longer have a place in this day and age. However, postmodernity has become such a part of our social and cultural fabric that the term seldom calls to mind complexity and contradictions. On one hand, a general awareness exists that there are multiple narratives that have not been privileged—such as those that focus on identity, gender, and silenced voices—and that are more fluid and complex than once assumed. On the other hand, concepts such as metaphysics often seem philosophically insurmountable, but if we do not consider the implications of what it means to isolate Truth (under the name of either Reason or God) outside the progression of history, our actions and engagements—under the guise of postmodernism—can cloak and even condone the continuation of normative practices.

I do not suggest that music education in the United States has an obsession with its history. It does seem, however, that for music education in the United States to be without history—with its implication of forward motion, as defined by expanding inclusion and parity—is for it to not exist. And, as documented at the first organized meeting of the MSNC, not existing has been a primary concern for music educators since at least 1907. Challenging the truth claims (e.g., music education's successful movement toward status as a "basic" discipline) about our history and policy entanglement is one way to examine how the normalization of music education history continues to ignore the historical discontinuities that deliberately challenge the assumption that we are moving toward a future of "happily ever after." It is also a way for music educators to grapple with how our actions are determined by truth claims from outside of the public institution about a history of musicking that predates institutionally organized music. Poster warns that "the failure to question the truth claims of the historian's writing or text operates by default to legitimize those forms of domination, to give cultural force to the hegemonic configuration of representationality" (1997, 6).

The truth claims embedded in the narrativization of music education are complicated. Events are recorded, but these events encompass coexisting and contradictory possibilities and present conflicting narratives. Thus, in choosing what and how to tell, the teller imposes an order imposed by a moralizing authority that separates the real from the imaginary and frames a solution and a resolution. Events in our past, then, are considered *real* as long as they are consistent with the narrativization. Events are *imaginary* when they fail to support the official story and consequently challenge the dominant discourse. Of course, events do occur that resist the official story, but these are often co-opted or accepted into the narrative as confirmations of the superior moral grounding of the real events; they thus actually function to "dismiss the counter discourse that challenges the falsification of reality" (Macedo 1994, 139). The success of the official story depends on our relationship with the authority who tells it, as well as the "degree to which [we] invest in the doctrinal system and expect rewards from it" (Macedo 1994, 17). Consequently, once a story assumes a particular ordering—and, consequently, is accepted as Truth—it can only be sustained through our dependence on and relationship to its telling. As White points out, "the kind of consciousness capable of imagining the need to represent reality as a history, is conceivable only in terms of its interest in . . . legitimacy" (1981).

There is a circular kind of determinism propelled by legitimacy that dictates not only the way our history is told, but also the way our lives mirror the telling of our history. The linear progression—which seems bound by an origin marked by utility and function—toward a mythologized endpoint of acceptance, recognition, and legitimacy is constantly monitored and reviewed. Performances (not only musical performances) are also continually reviewed and monitored, and their utility determines how we judge our usefulness, our own actions, and the actions of others. Ball (2008) refers to this kind of performativity as "a culture of [a] system of 'terror'" (49). He continues:

It is a regime of accountability that employs judgments, comparison and displays as means of control, attrition, and change. . . . These performances stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgment. (49)

Performativity, in this sense, reinforces not only the narrative of utility, but also the demarcation and reproduction of disparity and class antagonism. Foucault challenges this particular way of reducing an "entire history and genesis to an exclusive concern for utility" (1984, 76), because this reduction brushes aside engagements and moments that exist outside practices and narratives that privilege value and efficacy. Narratives of utility view history as emanating from a lofty origin from which one's identity is crafted. Yet this origin turns out, in light of the development of postmodernism, to be neither "timeless [n]or essential" (78), and we discover that this linear conception of history is bound by a historical structure that documents and thus provides the basis of our existence. The movement of music education toward inclusion as a "basic" discipline in the education system has always been presented as the only narrative possible.

Considering the use of the word *basic* in arts education, Hope suggests that "part of the problem is a lack of consistency between the term 'basic' as an arguing point or symbol of inclusion versus the meaning of 'basic' in conceptual and operational terms" (2006, 3). He points out one of the many ways we make "decisions not to think" (2002, 11), but he also problematizes the carelessness and assumptions that permeate our profession. Conflating the conceptual and the operational in our minds allows us to cling to the sanctioned narrativization of the forward motion of music education toward an endpoint (inclusion), yet it is exactly this forward motion that needs to be addressed, both conceptually and operationally. Bourdieu (1998) considers ways in which particular forms and ways of knowing are privileged and how they influence understandings of a basic discipline (e.g., through definitions of literacy, curricular decisions, assessment,

accountability, or pedagogical engagements). Although most people know that particular modes of thinking and knowing have historically been privileged over others—for example, those in the sciences over those in the arts and humanities—few grapple with concepts of power that are less obvious. Although these binaries appear dichotomous and hierarchical, each defines, supports, and even provides the base for the other. Bourdieu directs our attention to the influence of the state in openly articulating policies, the legitimation process, and the definitions of social and cultural capital. It makes sense, then, that an integral part of the process is the way in which stories are recognized, legitimated, afforded space, and reproduced in the historical memory. In other words, to ensure the continuous production of cultural and social capital, the system of production must continually reproduce the same conditions necessary for the continual reproduction of power relations.

One might conjecture, then, that purposeful pursuit of such reproduction would be necessary for this process to continue; however, it is precisely this relational parity—that is, the status of music education in relation to other fields—that we seek to rectify. Furthermore, the continual skirmishing in the arts community for local, state, and national recognition has become a normative practice and is even expected. This constant framing of the utility of music education for everything besides musicking as “intentional human action” (Elliott 1995, 50) reinforces the belief in inclusion as the endpoint of our existence. This struggle for equal positioning with other disciplines is more complex, however, than a simple disparity of resources, as evidenced by the MSNC’s 1907 list of concerns. The “invisibility of policy” (van Zanten 2007, 256) not only permeates the history of music education, but also presents policy as something a priori and tied to a metaphysical happy ending.

Chauncey (2008), working through a deconstructionist lens, points out that decisions are often made on the grounds of “the sanction of millennia of moral teaching and practice” and “millennia of

teaching and common sense” (31). These “common sense” practices and the policy decisions that support them continue to reproduce and underscore our purpose and engagements. Consequently, an act that challenges normative practice is considered deviant and an indication of a lack of support for music education. These practices are difficult to question,

because they rest upon assumptions that are unarticulated and that seem essential in making some headway in education. . . . Furthermore, the altruistic and humanitarian elements of these positions are quite evident, so it is hard to conceive of them as principally functioning to detract from our ability to solve social or educational problems. (Apple 1990, 125)

The historical narrative we have is simple; it offers guidance, hope of a “better” future, the semblance of agency, and resistance to the deterministic path. Grappling with the discontinuities and contradictions of this narrative and suggesting that policy may somehow be implicated in these problems seems to suggest moving off the established path and away from our shared goal. Yet,

it may very well be the case that the often unequal and problematic activities and consequences of schooling will not be fundamentally altered until we cease searching for simple solutions to our problems. Part of the answer, but only part, is to illuminate our political and conceptual orientations. (Apple 1990, 108)

Questions like those posed in 1907 have produced the search for simple solutions. This is certainly not to suggest that the people in our discipline who have struggled with issues of policy have done so in simple ways. Policy, however, needs to be addressed and reflected in the work of many others, including students and teachers. A willingness to contend with policy outside of consensus and common concepts of truth and linear progression opens up the possibilities found in complexity. Hope warns of being “blinded by simplicity” or “get[ting] lost in complexity” (2002, 11). His words remind us of the binary positioning that seems—problematically—almost “essential in making some headway in education” (Apple 1990, 125). “Getting lost” implies “being found.” And indeed, as we muck around in com-

plexity, we may initially get lost, but there are great possibilities in finding ourselves and finding new ways.

Conclusion

In the United States, every day some new piece of research appears showing diversity where one expected to see homogeneity, conflict where one expected to see consensus, reproduction and conservation where one expected to see mobility. (Bourdieu 1998, 12)

Foucault warns that genealogical analysis will eventually reveal that what will be “found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity” (1984, 77–78). What seems particularly important about this conclusion is not only its designation of a way of living that is not rooted in the search for origins, but also the acknowledgment that people *do* live as if an inviolable identity of their origin exists. Disparity thus seems a given. But disparity for Foucault is not the same as disparity for music education. “Cultivating details and accidents that accompany every beginning” (Foucault 1984, 78) would reveal discontinuities in the narrativization of music education and would, quite possibly, dispel the myth of linear progress.

Walter Benjamin grappled with the problems of historical linearism and the perceived determinism attached to this concept by drawing on three sources: German Romanticism, Jewish messianism, and Marxism (Löwy 2005, 4). As an alternative to current consensus, I note the ways in which Benjamin uses these sources to offer a conception of history that is neither deterministic nor inevitable. He challenges both current postmodernist engagements and the historical materialism of Marx. Benjamin, in Löwy’s estimation, “uses nostalgia for the past as a revolutionary method for the critique of the present” (2005, 2):

[His] nostalgia for the past does not mean it is necessarily retrograde: the Romantic view of the world may assume both reactionary and revolutionary forms. For revolutionary Romanticism the aim is not a *return* to the past, but a *detour* through the past on the way to a utopian future. (5)

The constraints of this article do not allow for an in-depth engagement with

Benjamin's work; I focus on him now as a way to frame consideration of the past, present, and future of music education. For Benjamin, a utopian revolution rooted in historical materialism does not indicate the complete deschooling of society or call for a messianic coming. A new conception of history includes multiple narratives, but it also calls for mindfulness of our complicity in reproducing a narrative that does not focus on the musicking we love. Nostalgia for our past does not mean that we should long for days when music programs were respected and funded. Instead, nostalgia for the past might be framed as the musicking that existed before organized schooling and the commodification of musicking.

Policy that crafts and affords space for music and musicking that is not bound by narrow historical narratives grounded in concepts of utility creates a process in which the use-value of musicking is highlighted. Policy that examines the ways in which the discourses of progress and success are framed attends to the political and moral values embedded in conceptions of progress.

The list of questions from 1907 continues to construct and frame who we are today. We must consider the effectiveness of policy that is still linked to these kinds of questions. Furthermore, we must address policy through the mechanisms of how history is told. Using a lens that shifts the discussion away from legitimacy and those parameters and values dictated outside of music education, policy studies must pose the following questions:

- How has policy continued or disrupted, stabilized or destabilized the narrativization of music education?
- How does policy create alternatives as well as alter histories?
- How has the language of policy—the social and cultural capital of language that legislates—manipulated our conceptions of who we are and who we can be?
- Can the kinds of policy questions we ask liberate not only ourselves, but also others outside of music education?

The problematic assumptions embedded in the idea that the “existence [of policy] presupposes potential action” (Hope 2002, 11) exemplifies the current entanglement of policy and narrated history based on coercion and subjugations. This idea also presupposes that action is based on a present that is linked to a past—an understanding bound by what Benjamin called “formless progress” and the “view of history that puts its faith in the infinite extent of time and thus concerns itself only with the speed, or lack of it, with which people and epochs advance along the path of progress” (qtd. in Löwy 2005, 6–7). A linear idea of history that is concerned with advancement along the path of progress shows a reluctance to embrace complexity and contradictions. Hope (2007, 3) reminds us that “one of the most important aspects of strategic analysis is determining gradations of danger and opportunity” and that “our decisions matter, whether they are made by design or by default.” Policy research that pushes us to consider the ontological positioning of this field can question those ways policy has ignored, overlooked, or perhaps even nourished false determinism.

Notes

1. One way to think through the concept of misrecognition is to consider the inability of players to recognize the larger economic, political, and ideological forces that produce and reproduce power relations and identities, such as the view of music teachers as “second-class citizens.”

2. In 1977, Christopher Small coined the term *musicking*. In his book *Musicking*, he addressed the concept of music as doing, rather than music as a thing. This is perhaps not a revolutionary idea now, but at the time the aesthetic model of music education was predominantly the only model of music education. In 1995, David Elliott published *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education*, which extended Small's work to speak of *musicking* as a verb in the same way dancing is a verb.

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