

Embracing Powerlessness and Empowerment: Coexisting Contradictions within Teacher Preparation¹

By

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which narratives of the "real world" and narratives of resistance collide in teacher preparation programs. The author suggests that in this collision acts of resistance serve to perpetuate and reproduce the very systems these acts seek to interrogate and challenge. How then does this disconnect, between very different ways of seeing and engaging with the educative process, manifest not only for ourselves, but for our students? This paper seeks to address how teachers of teachers grapple with, and even embrace, the contradictions of powerlessness and empowerment that come from the mindful engagement embedded in this path.

Whatever reproduction goes on is accomplished not only through the acceptance of hegemonic ideologies, but through opposition and resistances. (Apple, 1995, p. 23)

While subject matter knowledge will more than likely continue to remain important in the development of pre-service teachers, it seems crucial to look beyond content and skill development and situate teacher preparation in a broader context. As people who engage with others (others who have in their minds that they want to enter the world and "teach music"), many of us desire to facilitate environments in which our students are willing and able to engage in habits of inquiry that will enable them to make problematic and interrogate the power relations embedded in the programs from which they came, the programs they find themselves in now, and the world they will enter as first year teachers.

Coexisting with these habits of inquiry we desire to model and embody are the narratives and discourses that serve to reproduce and perpetuate those power structures we seek to interrogate and challenge. One such narrative is that of the "real world." With horror stories of "survival" and "trenches" and "other," this narrative seems particularly pervasive in our teacher preparation rhetoric. And while those who desire to prepare and "train" students for the "real world" seem to have nothing but good intentions at heart—for what would we be if we did not prepare our students for the "real world"—perhaps it is best to remind ourselves of Daniel Webster's words when describing the purpose of the US Constitution, "Good intentions will always be pleaded for every assumption of authority."

I would like to suggest that this particular narrative, when gone unrealized at the university level, is insidious and more menacing to our profession than the local school board cutting the funds for music education programs. This narrative often renders it reprehensible to envision teacher preparation as something other than survival in the trenches, and perpetuates the careful maintenance of normative practices and "what has always been."

How then, does this coexistence between very different ways of engaging in the educative process manifest, not only for ourselves, but for our students? How do these ways serve to reproduce ideology guided by particular needs? Are those of us who ask our students to challenge existing paradigms and to reject a representation of the "real world," actually perpetuating this representation?

Palmer asks us to "[recover our] identity and integrity" so that we may "[recall] the wholeness of our lives" (1998, p. 41). Such an undertaking seems at odds with the

maintenance of a binary, either/or existence. Such an undertaking would indicate a willingness to live with a sense of powerlessness. Survival would then take on a whole new meaning—one less identified with getting through, and more with naming and embracing the source of powerlessness as empowerment.

I center this paper around my university music education program in which students are being asked to contemplate, to consider, and to engage with what it means to know and move into the world as people who will engage with others in and through music. By doing so, I acknowledge that the ideological framing I use to consider issues plays a part in the socialization process of the students with whom I come in contact. To attempt to pretend that these issues I address, and the ways I address the issues, are something outside of myself would be to deny my own compliance, as well as to allow my own ideological representation to go unchallenged. As such, even though I will speak specifically of my program throughout this paper, I sense that these issues will resound with others'. Clearly, I can't refer to where I teach as a "Large Private University in the Northeast," but what I can try and do is to continually remind the reader and myself of my own culpability in the ways in which my discourse served and serves to perpetuate particular forms of reproduction.

The students

For the most part, the students who come to this music education program have been rewarded for very particular ways of being and knowing. And, for the most part, they come from very particular kinds of music programs. They have spent close to nine years not only in "quality" music programs, but in the elite and honors sections of those "quality" music programs. They see absolutely no reason to mess around with a system

that was incredibly good to them. Consequently, as most of them had teachers whom they love and even idolize, they want very much to replicate (with what could only be construed as the "very best intention") the "good" programs and experiences they had.

Such is the daunting and unassailable wall they place before us.

When pushed to consider that perhaps these programs weren't "good" for everyone, they respond with the immediacy and assuredness of missionaries intent on colonizing "children who have never known the joy of having music in their lives, [giving] them a gift that they will never forget" (MENC Collegiate NewsLink, Dec., 2004). On the other hand, they are often quick to point out that some students are only in music because they have to be, but rather than see this as an ethical dilemma, they see this as a motivational challenge: "What can I do to make them want to be there so they don't bring the group down?" The possibility that these students, who are getting in the way of their "quality" programs, would be engaging in conscious acts of what Kohl (1994) would call "not learning," would simply never occur to them.

These students, are already engaging in systematic acts of "othering."² Their discourse reflects forms of representation that Koptiuch (1997) would say "constitute(s) people as proper objects of control" (p. 237). However, they themselves can't yet see how they are objects of control, nor do they see, those first few months of their freshman year, how the department they just entered serves to replicate and reproduce that control.

The place

The University setting is a very particular place. It is a place that is both physical and ideological. The music education program at my university is one that, for many years, was primarily focused on training music educators in ways that did little to

encourage students to interrogate or challenge the status quo. As such, it was a place where particular practices not only framed the meaning of the program, but were framed by a tradition of past practices in the field. There were "appropriate" dispositions of behaving (explicitly referenced and implicitly implied) for professors and students, that as Cresswell (1996) writes, "reproduced beliefs that made [music teaching] appear natural, self-evident, and commonsense" (p. 16). What seemed commonsense and traditional in music education was being reproduced and replicated in the music education program, thus, as Cresswell continues, the program was being "produced by and producing ideology" (p. 17).

With the hiring of another music educator in a senior position, a concerted effort was made to challenge this particular ideology and question the "in-place" behaviors of this music program. Thus (as an adjunct professor at the time), I became optimistic that the music education program would become one in which students would grapple with challenging prevailing discourses.

In the ensuing year other changes were made, including the offer of a full time position for myself as well as others who brought to the setting years of practical "real world" experience in the New York City Public Schools. Thus, in what Bruner (2002) would call, a "sudden reversal of circumstances" (p. 5), the program became both a purposeful site of resistance, as well as a site intent on reproducing the dominant order.

Clearly, this is not an unusual situation for music education programs. Yet, perhaps it was because of the hopes I had for the possibilities of this program that I was unable to realize that my colleagues and I might see each other differently. Nor did I

realize (until it seemed too late) that the acts of resistance I was asking students to consider were the very "seeds" necessary for the reproduction of "in-place" behaviors.

Seeing them as Other

Music education can and should be a place of transformation, as such, I believe pedagogy, or interactions with students, is at the heart of this process. As I also believe that transformation first begins with the self, I desire to interact with students so that through those interactions I not only model the process of becoming but also facilitate a place for transformation.

As such, creating spaces in classrooms in which a very particular kind of discourse will make possible these transformations is always my immediate concern. As part of that process, I engaged (and engage) in asking students and myself to grapple with how easy it is to forget the human agency embedded in the words we use. I ask them to consider not only what they know, but how they come to know what they think they know. We speak endlessly of rewards and punishments; always trying to push deeper into the constraints and ramifications of living such a system. I ask them to consider the ways in which they have been validated and what that validation is, as well as what it might be. I help them to challenge traditional ways of knowing and what it might mean to consider other ways of knowing, as well as their point of privilege and how that frames everything they think or do. I ask them to consider the ways in which language shapes and defines the ways in which we engage. I ask them to reflect and think critically and consider agendas and ideology. I ask them to live with the discomfort of having what they thought they knew challenged, and to find comfort with ambiguity and, as Froehlich

(2006) reminds us, "to embrace the certainty of uncertainty."³ I ask them to engage in acts of resistance.

In essence, I think of myself as a critical theorist, a critical pedagogue. It never occurred to me to consider the ways in which my pedagogy and this engagement with and in the world might be perpetuating contradictory agendas.

The discourse of the "real world"

Throughout this process the music education students were also being prepared to confront and enter the "reality" of teaching in New York City public schools. One way to describe this discourse is one that prepares and "trains" the music education students to "survive" in a world where the perception is that students come from homes in which parents "are not involved with their children," and where students "experience a lack of discipline and structure at home" (MENC Collegiate NewsLink, Dec., 2004). It is also a discourse that frames "quality" music programs as those that consistently score high at New York State music festivals; a discourse that often obfuscates the point that these schools are most often magnet and specialized schools in which students, in order to attend, must have the resources and wherewithal to apply, take a test, and audition.

This discourse, problematic as it is, became more worrisome to me as I realized two scenarios. I had been meeting with first year teachers each month throughout the year so that we might continue the conversations we had begun when they were in classes. During those first meetings they were distraught as they confronted their very "real world" situations and the juxtaposition of the world we had imagined together. My sense of failure in that I had not prepared these students for the "real world" was overwhelming.

At the same time these dinners with the first year teachers were taking place, I discovered that the freshman were panicking that they weren't going to be prepared enough to get a job. It seemed that the kinds of ideas they were being asked to consider with me were not matching up to the "real world" vision and "training" they were being asked to understand and embrace.

In the second scenario, "real world" had become a signifier, a slogan for a grand narrative of legitimation that I had failed and was failing to help them deconstruct. I was able to identify the language that was being used, but I had not deconstructed the "processes through which this discourse was being produced" (Giroux, 1998, p. 103). This phrase, "real world," was not being used as a concept-metaphor, nor as "a name or representation," but rather was being invoked as a fixed and real place (Koptiuch, 2001, p. 236). As I realized this I asked myself the questions, how then, for what purpose, and why was the term being used this way?

Lather (1991) believes that "Language is the terrain where differently privileged discourses struggle via confrontation and/or displacement" (p. 8). Clearly, these students were and had become vessels through which this confrontation played out. The coexisting contradictions in language, and interpellation of the "real world," that suggested a fixed state in which maintenance took precedence over possibility and fluidity, and the ensuing disconnect these students were suffering, demanded an examination of the intended goals of this program.

In the second scenario, the invocation of "real world" was not based on, as Althusser would describe, "real conditions," but rather ideology as "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (2001, p. 109).

While the students were engaged in observing and teaching in concrete situations with real conditions, back at the university this world was being represented to them in such a way that encouraged the perpetuation of an "imaginary relationship" other professors had with and to this world. These professors, by naming what the students were observing, were able to reproduce a system and socialization process that had served to solidify and sanction their own years of experience as absolute and definitive.

There is a great deal of self-identity derived from working "successfully" for so long in teaching and administrative positions. Clearly, as Bowers (1987) would point out, these "individuals have a degree of ego-investment in maintaining those definitions and assumptions upon which their self-concept is based" (p. 42). Taking on a new discourse would mean to challenge the ways and the knowings for which they were rewarded.

But clearly, it isn't and wasn't just that.

In discussions and dialogue students often do reject this definitive "real world" representation. However, even though we have addressed the very real possibility that what we discuss does not often exist in schools, when they observe and teach in real conditions, they are confronted in ways for which they never seem prepared.

Even though they reject the traditional paradigms and normative practices that we interrogate in class they struggle with observing (and in the case of the first year teachers, living) the dissonance of a very particular model of theory/practice. Dejected and disillusioned by what they perceive as immutable, they return to their university classes; to comforting, welcoming and forgiving arms. They return to well-meaning empathy that suggests that their forays into philosophy might have been entertaining, but now it's time

for the real work of teachers. It's time to make "choices that are sanctioned by the correct."⁴

Hence, even as they reject this representation, their confrontation with the "real world" way of knowing and doing, and the perceived skills needed for these traditional programs, serves only to strengthen the "rightness" of the "real world" representation, serving to perpetuate such false dichotomies as experience/scholar, or even skills/philosophy. But as Apple (1995) points out, their rejection and resistance is necessary to the reproduction and representation, as the "seeds of reproduction lie in this very rejection" (p. 90).

Marx writes of dialectical contradictions that coexist; of our interaction between the objects and (extended by others to include) social constructions to be known, and our engagements with these objects and constructions. It is not a matter of satisfying these contradictions, because by their nature they cannot be "satisfied." But rather, it is to attempt to see how these contradictions have been named, how they exist, and how and why they are connected. Clearly, the students have difficulty in negotiating and mediating these differing discourses and social constructions that coexist, and in a very real sense feel powerless, but does this mean that their individual internalizations of what it means to challenge and interrogate the world are for naught? How then do acts of resistance serve to transform systems of domination and control if their function is one of symbiotic coexistence?

What then does it mean to be empowered? Have these students not been empowered? Had I not empowered them?

What is empowerment? For Bookman and Morgen (1988) empowerment "connote(s) a spectrum of political activities ranging from acts of individual resistance to mass political mobilizations that challenge the basic power relations in our society" (p. 4). I often discuss with students that acts of resistance begin small. And I do believe that many of these students do go out into the world empowered to engage in and with the "real world" in ways that will affect their own transformation and thus perhaps others around them. Yet, it is not something I can do to, or for, students. What I can do is help them to recognize contradictions (and their complicity in the reciprocal engagement of contradictions) as they move through the requirements of their classes and fulfill their observation and student teaching hours. Bookman and Morgen believe that "empowerment begins when [people] change their ideas about the cause of their powerlessness, when they recognize the systemic forces that oppress them, and when they act to change the conditions of their life" (p. 4). It seems to me, however, that facilitating environments in which my students and myself grapple with changing our ideas needs also to begin with dialogue between myself and my colleagues.

And yet I often feel powerless when I am called to engage with their "real world" narrative, discovering (much to my chagrin) that in the conversations I have with others I often privilege their way of knowing. In those engagements I see myself through their eyes and I imagine that I react exactly as my students do: I reject how they see the world and yet in those moments I am convinced that I am "teaching" these students nothing of worth.

How is it that I allow them to define who I am and how I am? As I ask students to engage in behaviors that encourage them to name their own reality, thus hopefully

transforming themselves in the process, it seems incredibly remiss and unethical that I should not be able to engage in the same. And yet, I almost always fall silent in the face of the representation of "experience" and "real world," shying away from conflict (which serves to perpetuate their world). In their naming of who I am, and what I am, I feel powerless (as well as a sense of guilt) to articulate reasons for engaging in the world in ways that may, in all probability, challenge who they are and how they have been named. Thus my silence (as Ellsworth has documented) is a mixture of the "fear of being misunderstood and/or disclosing too much and becoming too vulnerable" (p. 316). It is also a manifestation of the internal struggle to recognize that I am not the enemy, as well as the resentment I feel about the ways in which they are allies; resentment that I have to prove the validity of the ways in which I think. And finally, and probably more to the point, it is also my worry and guilt that I'm not smart enough or articulate enough to engage in what would essentially be conversations of philosophy.

Ellsworth (1989) speaks of the myths of "ensuring a safe place to speak," of "equal opportunit(ies) to speak" and even "equal power in influencing decision making" (p. 315). As there is an inherent inequality embedded in the socialization process of professors/students there is as well between tenure track professors and non-tenure track professors. As much as I would like it to be different, and as much as I believe that it is possible, this does not make it so. And as I struggle with attempting to broach and articulate the inherent contradictions in our pedagogical engagements the turf lines just seem to set deeper.

I know that who I am and how I think challenges the ways in which others have engaged with the world. So in my desire to engage in dialogue I must be cognizant of the

ways in which they may see my actions as ones of "false charity." Noddings (2006) asks us to look at the "self in connection to other selves" (p. 289). And as we consider who we are in the world she then asks us to consider as well "How and why do we act on the world? How does it act on us" (p. 289)? I see the ways in which many people engage with the world as a manifestation of peoples who (whether they see this or not) have been oppressed by, and have worked within, a very oppressive system. As such, if I desire students to feel liberated to engage with the world as empowered individuals, I must also engage with others so that they begin to understand how non-critical engagement with this particular representation of music education (and the world) silences (even their) voices, and continues to "other" human beings. And while I can't empower colleagues, I can care for the encounters we do have, hopefully giving, as Noddings (1992) reminds us, "respectful attention to the social customs and principles they accept" (p. 100).

I need to remind myself that they most likely feel the same resentments that I do; that they aren't the enemy, and that they struggle with the "allies" I have with others. I also realize that in and through this paper I speak for them. I give them a voice that is based solely on my own inability to facilitate a space in which all of our voices might begin to be heard. I might even consider that they see their non-engagement with my ideas as an act of not-learning, as an act of resistance. They see me, and the ideas I represent, as a form of oppression. Perhaps, then they see not-learning as a strategy that makes it possible for them, as Kohl (1994) writes, to "not fall into madness or total despair" (p. 10).

It often seems that others see the world as fixed where I see possibilities of fluidity and the processes of becoming. Yes, all of us always shape and are shaped by

ideology, as we shape and are shaped by our resistance and engagements to and with that ideology. I believe in a commitment toward taking on a critical consciousness, and a commitment to end all forms of oppression. I do believe in, as hooks writes, "Learning [that] serve(s) to educate students for the practice of freedom rather than the maintenance of existing structures of domination" (hooks, 2003, p. 46). But as I care for students, I also see the need to care for colleagues.

Is caring then, an act of resistance? In caring to (as Giroux writes) "deconstruct the processes through which discourse [is] being produced (Giroux, 1998, p. 103) am I not attempting to understand the complexity of our relationship that seems so obviously emblematic of a larger representation of the world? It seems imperative that I care for their points of view and that I do not attempt to silence them, (or allow myself to be silent) and that I engage with them in ways that allow for the possibilities of the "wonderment of dialogue"⁵ that might help all of us see the problematics of advancing agendas. As such, it also seems imperative that I remind myself that empowerment is not about "upward mobility or personal advancement" (Bookman, Morgen, 1988, p. 4).

In our meetings, and our engagements how do all of us move away from the "language of recognition"⁶ that suggests the semblance of "presenting the veneer of inclusion," yet really only serves to get us through those moments in which hurt and anger seem always at the surface of our dialogue. Somehow we must recognize the "tenacity and inertia of unexamined practices."⁷ Yet, can this happen? How to craft and afford these spaces? How do I care for and recognize the experience others bring to discussions.

Caring—indeed all acts of resistance—call for an act of commitment. I also believe they call for, the "ethical obligation to choose."⁸ Others may not desire my caring, and I may have to continue to wrestle with the guilt and the burden of perhaps not caring, as well as the realization that I cannot frame this as saving them (Bookman & Morgen, 1988). I care for these students and I choose a life that is constantly becoming; I choose to continue to model for students those ways in which I struggle with this process, modeling for them the "certainty of uncertainty."⁹ While conscious that these acts of resistance may be integral to processes of reproduction, I cannot forgo their embodiment. There are possibilities derived from such coexisting contradictions, and they may be at the center of critical engagements, perhaps at the center of teaching. As Dewey (1902/1990) pointed out,

Profound differences in theory are never gratuitous or invented. They grow out of conflicting elements in a genuine problem—a problem which is genuine just because the elements alone as they stand are conflicting. Any significant problem involves conditions that for the moment contradict each other. Solution comes only by getting away from the meaning of terms that is already fixed upon and coming to see the condition from another point of view, and hence in a fresh light. But this reconstruction means travail of thoughts. (p. 181)

Such travail of thought and contradictions help me to envision (or hope for) questioning and doubt not merely as hesitation and certainty, but a mindful struggle in "act(ing) to change the conditions of my life." The "solution" comes in my willingness to engage with this process as one that constantly becomes; the always already dialectic of powerlessness and empowerment.

Notes

¹ This paper was originally presented at the 2006 MayDay Group Colloquium XVII, Princeton, NJ, under the title, "Embracing Powerlessness and Despair: Teaching, or Teacher Education? What The Hell Were Any Of Us Thinking." The theme of the conference dealt with power, empowerment and new pedagogies.

² Further reading on "others" and "othering" see for instance, Delpit, L. (1995), Valenzuela, A. (1999), Nieto, S. (2002), Benedict, C (2006).

³ Hildegard Froehlich made this remark in her paper, "Institutional Belonging, Pedagogic Discourse, and the Music Teacher Education Experience," at the 2006 MayDay Group Colloquium.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Patrick Schmidt made this remark in his paper, "Dialogue as Pedagogical Vision: Listening to What We Don't/Won't Say," at the 2006 MayDay Group Colloquium.

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Wayne Bowman made this remark in his paper, "Hegemony, Power, and Exclusion in Music Education: Themes from the Vancouver Colloquium," Hegemony, Power, and Exclusion in Music Education: Themes from the Vancouver Colloquium," at the 2006 MayDay Group Colloquium.

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Froehlich