

## From Whence Justice? Interrogating the Improbable in Music Education

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*We are not attempting to transform the world, but we are allowing ourselves to be transformed.*

Noddings (2003)

*It may be that to believe in this world, in this life, has become our most difficult task, the task of a mode of existence to be discovered on our plane of immanence today.*

Deleuze (2002)



We have chosen to move together in examining the issue of social justice because we both struggle with the pedagogical implications of what it means to be in this world. As we seek to embody the dialectic process of creating new understandings in our lives, and thus in our classrooms, we seek also to create this through our examination of this topic: its implications, its discourses, and its enactments. In what follows, these pursuits first take the form of theoretical engagement; we then bring this theory into the realm of music education.<sup>i</sup>

As we engage with the issue of social justice, we attempt in our lives (and now in our writing) to create and afford space—extending to each other the freedom to explore rather than defend and justify. In doing so, we give attention to how our ideas are shaped by the other's thoughts. We seek not to persuade each other, or others, but rather to participate together and explore that which can be created in dialogue rather than separately. Our purpose is not to “make common,” to draw on a distinction made by Bohm (1996, p. 3), but rather to “make something in common” so that we may move toward deeper understandings of the why, the what, and the how of social justice. In writing together we seek to model, enact, and engage in dialogue, disregarding both the need to be “right” and the need to agree

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or disagree. Thus, we move into this inquiry desiring to model, through the written word, those ways in which we hope to be in the world.

*Deleuze (2002) proposes that human nature is constituted not by some idea or other, but rather by the ways we pass from one to another. I propose that this is also a constitutive feature of dialogue. Further, this passing, this movement of passage or transition—which invokes the need for embodiment and enactment—requires a certain belief, a certain trust that what we assume is and can be, will in fact become (if construed critically through dialogue and change/exchange of ideas).<sup>2</sup> While we have seen it happen, however, we acknowledge its uncertainty; for it to be it must become. Thus, we believe we can construct something together, before we can, as well as because we can.*

*As we consider “social justice” in our society and music education, in our practices and in our daily lives, we would like to consider its extent and form, and whether and why the need to subsume social justice within the broader idea of “justice” leaves us orphaned by the words we use—the indelible assumptions behind them—and the narrow encircling of realities shaped and narrated to conform to our own discourses.*

*Individuals’ indelible needs for reason-giving and for self-representation are, as Tilly (2006) proposes, intrinsically connected to our attempts to normalize our relationships with others. What does that suggest about engagement with spaces where agency can take place? What are the structural and epistemic problems that attend agency and its alignment with justice? To what extent has justice become a mere convention, thus invoking through our habitual parlance and practices a concept demanding little deliberation, and associated practices that require little by way of engagement? Has social justice, an old and historied concept once again in vogue, become an abstract ideal absolved by its formulaic familiarity of obligations to interaction, consideration, toil, and care? Can the very structures that preserve and portray justice become the dystopic influence that subverts the meaningful interactions on which just actions rely?*

*We come to this examination together and yet apart. By “allowing ourselves to be transformed” by and through our interactions, as Noddings would have it, we hope that our engagement will model what we seek to describe with our words. Because we are cognizant in many ways and on many levels of the differences between our voices, we also anticipate and embrace the faltering and fallibility always present in dialogue, and inherent in all communicative acts.*

Consequently, this paper reflects a collaborative effort to devise a way of thinking through and creating understandings that are not wholly constrained by the written word. What follows is not a neatly flowing dialogue that streams cleanly from section to section. Rather, it is a fluid form that reflects how each of us has engaged with social justice through the voice and the ideas of the other.

*For instance, as we exchanged ideas about social justice, I (my voice always in italic) became interested in the possibility of the subsumption of social justice by justice, which became one point of departure. And I, through a path best described as existential crisis, became interested in the ways the act of naming (social justice being one such “way”) frames who we are—and in the ways it constrains our possibilities of becoming.*

*Is spite of the fluidity of our exchange, it is our intent to involve you, the reader, in several issues and questions that were raised in our dialogue. First, we want to explore the purpose of social justice, asking “Social justice for whom? And social justice, how?” Second, we want to resist the conflation or equation of equity and social justice. And finally, we want to examine social justice through a pedagogical lens.<sup>3</sup>*

### **Enacting the complex**

*In speaking of the changes the U.S. has experienced in its recent past, Kirn (2006) proposes that in addition to the losses associated with persistent and increasing economic and social inequities, Americans have also lost, through a process of mystification, a concern with the meaning of many crucially important words and expressions. He asserts, for instance, that what was once signified by the word “poor” has been insidiously and profoundly transformed into anemic, myopic misrepresentations of the embodied realities of those living in poverty.<sup>4</sup> The deep entrapment of poverty has come to be perceived variously as a failure of will or a transitory set back. As he puts it, “the condition once described by ‘poor’—has been orphaned by ordinary speech. It’s a simple idea without a simple word” (p.12). However, its complexity seems to constantly lead us to attempt to explain it, to give reasons, albeit without challenge.*

*As human agents, we reason, feel, respond, dissent, enact, embody, and in it all, we must choose. To exercise responsible human agency is to act intentionally—aware, we hope, of the limitations of our choices, of paths not taken, of options not pursued, of assumptions unexamined. But at the same time, we often long for the security or certainty of structures*

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*and institutions with established parameters, limiting the choices we must make. When we appeal to “right action,” then, do we consider “right action” proxied by tradition and stasis as well as perception and of course misperception? If, as Goffman (1983) proposes, we understand how others perceive us from the impressions we leave rather than the “give-and-take” of the interactions themselves, is choice possible independent of our exchanges with others? How do we reach social choices that go beyond our own senses of self? How do we conceive of, enact, or even recognize justice that arises from and through interaction?*

We speak of a kind of longing that we often feel for the ways complexity and certainty absolve us of the onerous tasks of wrestling with complicity and responsibility. Recognizing this in our own lives and in the lives of our students, we concern ourselves with the ways in which we often forget, or perhaps disregard, that constructs are of human origin. So while we are not wrong to ask, “How do we enact justice that arises from and through interaction?” we need to remain cognizant that it is only through interactions with others that justice can be enacted.

I enter this conversation struggling with discovering who and how we can be through what already seems to be a very particular construction and naming of social justice. I want to be part of this conversation, and yet not be seduced (and mystified) by taken-for-granted assumptions or practices merely habitually associated with the idea of social justice. I remind myself that in interrogating and challenging who I am in this world, both how I came to be and who I am to become must remain open, porous, fluid. This processual fluidity is at odds with the kind of stasis imposed by the act of naming. To name is, on some level, to appropriate and thereby distort. To that extent I must resist, reject, and refuse having who I am subsumed by the act of naming it: “social just.”

*The ways we arrogate propositions, ideals, concepts, and practices are also implicated in our inability to see justice and social justice pertaining not simply to the realm of otherness—some predefined, abstract notion of distanced engagement—but rather as a mode of orientation with multiple points of entry: personal, social, communal. Put differently, social justice is a mode of engagement that demands both embodiment and enactment. Without those it remains, perhaps, the kind of abstract notion that, as Foucault (1982) submits, “does not explain, but must itself be explained.” Thus, social justice is the kind of concept that, together with the assumptions it implicates, needs to remain an unresolved problem.*

*What is lost of “social justice” in its subsumption by the concept is lost from both consciousness and memory. Framed as a concept rather than a construct, social justice becomes the kind of thing that can be explained—and explained away: an abstract entity no longer reliant of embodied action. Instead, we find comfort glorifying the noble, abstract, and distant. Can we live and create contradictory moments where, in attending to an ideal of social justice, we enact the denial of its practice?*

I desire to continually re-engage and consider my actions—the ways I attempt to embody ways of being in the world that allow me to care for others—without having them reduced to nothing by characterizations, designations, and enactments of “just” practices that have become objectified and codified. To impose a definition on social justice without first interrogating the power of naming is to risk seduction (a seduction that suggests both a willingness and reluctance) by the “the noble, abstract, and distant.” Rather than trafficking in concepts, the abnegation of desire, or the subtly coercive deception that comes from loosing sight of being in this world as a process—as becoming—I choose to recognize my own privileged positioning vis-à-vis “otherness” so that I may embrace the critical consciousness that comes with addressing my own complicity.

And yet, there is a fear in this process: a deeply embedded, managed, and perhaps calculated fear; a sense of paralysis that attends not being able to articulate what it is I am to myself, to my students, and to others. There is also the fear that the something we seek to be, or to understand in life, does not exist in words: or, even worse, that it does exist in words, and then where might that leave us? This paradox seems “calculated” to evoke fear of “loss of individual happiness and freedom” (Ellsworth 1991, p. 61), defining and orchestrating a process of engaging. Palmer assures us that we “can have fear” but that “we need not be fear” (1998, p. 57). Yet fear and dread accompany this pursuit—both constituted by an unfeasibility of seeing this process as one of longing and indeed the desire to embrace; thus obfuscating the possibilities embedded in the impossibility of desire and dread (Ellsworth 1998).<sup>5</sup> Is there indeed an “either or-ness” between construct and concept, as proposed above? Does framing the conversation in this way produce or engender a false dichotomy? Is there a binary relationship, or can there be an acceptance, a welcoming of a continuum of knowings and understandings? Palmer (1998) reminds us that “paradoxical thinking requires that we embrace a view of the world in which opposites are joined, so that we can see the world

clearly and see it whole. Such a view is characterized by neither flinty-eyed realism nor dewy-eyed romanticism but rather by a creative synthesis of the two” ( p. 66).

In order to enact a creative synthesis of being, we must realize that, as Palmer suggests, paradoxes cease to exist when their parts are separated from each other. In order to embrace the paradox and the immense possibilities of an existence predicated on becomings and see the world in all its complexity and as a whole, we must give up the comfort and safety of belief that names, definitions, and concepts can, as Palmer writes, “win us freedom from the constraints [of reality]” (p. 19).

### **Self, place and space: for whom social justice**

*Cresswell (1996) proposes that “what is right, just and appropriate is transmitted through space and place” (p.8), emphasizing (through Bourdieu) the transience of what is considered just, as well as its dependence upon contextual parameters. In other words, spatial and locational considerations determine not only our worldviews and our abilities to envision possibilities, they define who we are.*

*The structuring of time and space in relation to our bodies determines not only practice but also representation. The geographical can define good or bad, unfair or just, equal or not. So, for instance, schools and schooling create through their usage of space and time, their own understandings of ideas like justice, fairness, or equity. At the same time, Cresswell submits, “places are duplicitous in that they cannot be reduced to the concrete or the merely ideological; rather they display an uneasy and fluid tension between them” (p. 13). Thus, we can and should broaden our understanding of place and consider not merely schools, but schooling, not merely rules or laws but justice, not simply practice but its ideation. How do we arrive at—and transgress—these moments of tension and interaction? Then, how do we address their labeling?*

*Justice, like laws and rules, is defined in a process of labeling, which, its immediate results aside, is predicated on engagement with power. That is, both the act of labeling and the creation of the space in which and by which the act of definition occurs, are influenced by individuals who have the power to determine what is valid and what is not: the power “to make rules for others” (p.25). Those entrusted to make rules have the power to define what is appropriate, just, and good, and what is not—their opposites.*

*Does “social justice,” approached as concept rather than construct, serve to define and reinforce the center and thus to consolidate status quo positionings? If center and margins are co-dependent,<sup>6</sup> how can we relativize established authority and truth without portraying socially just practices as deviant? In other words, it seems to me that efforts to transgress the parameters of socially just actions need to find meaning both in violation and transcendence of established parameters: to deconstruct without necessarily demolishing.<sup>7</sup>*

*Consider a further point advanced by Cresswell: “To propose a radical transformation is not to propose the abolition of place, but to propose transformation in the types of spaces we inhabit” (p.151). Knowing “one’s place” is a powerful classifier, creating limits and borders, as well as a strong sense of what is and is not appropriate. Bourdieu’s “doxa” —acceptance of established definitions where there is neither alternative nor possibility—is helpful in understanding the limitations we might encounter in an attempt to “transgress.” If Doxa is ur-experience—never questioned, never in conflict—then agency is compromised, replaced by alienated versions of engagement or resistance whose core is not so much action as intent. Action is replaced by discourse. As Cresswell puts it, “agents recognize the ‘legitimacy’ of the social order because they ‘misrecognize’ the contingent nature of that order. In effect they are not aware of the question of legitimacy in the first place” (p. 20). Thus, transgression implicates a vision of justice and social justice grounded in the re-creation or reconfiguration of material spaces. Mere intent or personal commitment (implicit in the ideas of resistance and agency, respectively) are not sufficient. Focusing on transgressions as actions devoted to the creation of new spaces, can help us approach social justice from a perspective quite different from those to which we have grown accustomed.*

*If we explore our ideological creations and realities by interrogating the spaces we inhabit, we can engage in practices that accept and embrace the need to reengage constantly.<sup>8</sup> Just as place creates difference—by separating insider from outsider—so too can social justice, in its normativity. It follows that if music education and music educators are to develop in and through social justice, we must acknowledge the ease with which static and reified (that is, normative) forms of “social justice” can deteriorate into mere slogans or empty gestures—thus, creating further disparity, inequity, oppression, miseducation; creating difference, in other words, whose interest is Other(ing).*

### **“Just” practices and social justice: a false conflation?**

Regelski has written of the “right actions” of praxis that “benefit specific but varying needs of individuals” (2005, p. 12). Just practices might be construed similarly. However, what are “right results” when considering social justice? How do needs and criteria differ, for instance, when considering urban and suburban underserved populations, US border towns, the gay, lesbian, transgendered community? How do needs differ when considering white, upper-middle class enclaves of New York City, of Mission Hills, Kansas; Scarsdale, NY; Albuquerque, New Mexico; or even Omaha, Nebraska?<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Morton (2001) has called our attention to the questions and challenges embedded in multiculturalism, pointing out the problematics of implementing multicultural curriculum based on issues of musical and cultural homogeneity and diversity, suggesting that questions of community would be “better addressed if multicultural music education was informed by the moral and political vision of critical multiculturalism” (p. 33). Such considerations would help to interrogate “contingencies,” as she proposes, and the situatedness of positioning.

My concern is that results, “just” practices, and equity have been defined from a privileged point of view suggesting something “done for” communities or groups or individuals that are often characterized as “underprivileged.” The hierarchical implications embedded in privileging some of these communities over others are largely unexamined, and thus problematic, while their commonalities are for the most part overlooked. When we think of social justice it is often in the context of “othering,” or doing something for someone we are not.

It makes sense, then, that people sometimes resist “just” acts that are contextualized as something done for them. Lincoln (1992) suggests that an act of resistance is the “. . . stubborn refusal to accept social definitions of one's meanings and experiences when social definitions do not match one's own subjective inner experiences” (p. 93). Being named, and labeled, and housed in public institutions—in which neglect of culture, soul, and physical environment are widespread—shapes beliefs about how one can be in the world. These places and communities embody a sense of inevitability and complexity that suggests something so big, so overwhelming, that acts of resistance will only reproduce or reinforce existing power structures.

Students often resist by refusing to “behave” or “conform” in ways that suggest compliance with the status quo: what are regarded as desirable norms in one situation can be



acts of undesired compliance in another. Kohl (1994) calls this process “not-learning,” or the conscious decision not to learn something that you could learn” (p. xiii). It is an action in which one engages in order to protect oneself, as well as a rejection of the world of those (others) who challenge one’s “personal and family loyalties, integrity, and identity” (p. 6). In other words, students create resistant spaces so as not to become “socialized in ways that are sanctioned by the dominant authority” (p. 6). Although Kohl’s descriptions of non-compliance are not intended to describe the structural and systemic dynamics associated with being “other,” they are suggestive of possibilities: They resonate with Cresswell’s (1996) phrase, “an act that draws the lines on a battlefield and defines the terrain on which contestation occurs” (p. 23).

I suggest, then, that students are very aware of “questions of legitimacy,” and have a keen sense of being “out of place.” Accordingly, as Valenzuela (1999) points out, they engage in acts of non-compliance that serve to assert cultural identity. Students, she writes, “participate in the construction of ‘otherness’ even as they are collectively ‘othered’ by institutional practices that are ideologically invested in their cultural and linguistic divestment” (p. 17).

These results, these acts of non-compliance, are noticed, judged, and deemed “out of place.” These acts of deviance—refusals to act white,<sup>10</sup> for instance, or to ‘buy into’ received versions of academic success—Cresswell describes as “pathological infliction” (p. 24). In such cases, acts motivated by commitments to social justice are unlikely to succeed because the desire to “help” (make?) students “care” about formal schooling comes from a culture perceived as alien to their own lived experience.

### **“Making change”: re-considering resistance...again**

By examining and questioning the efficacy of the child centered, “whole language,” process-oriented writing movement, Delpit (1995) deconstructs progressive ideology, suggesting that it has not served members of the African American community well. This agenda is not “just,” she argues, but an act of imposition by “liberals” who believe that making rules explicit somehow limits “freedom and autonomy of those subjected to the explicitness” (p. 26). According to Delpit, “To provide schooling for everyone's children that reflects liberal, middle-class values and aspirations is to ensure the maintenance of the status quo, to ensure that power, the culture of power, remains in the hands of those who already have it (p. 28).

Both Delpit and Valenzuela see the assumption of “in place” and “normative” practices as obliterations of the very cultures from which students come. In fact, Delpit goes so far as to call the attempt to “make” or “change” students to mirror those in the “culture of power” a form of “cultural genocide” (p. 30). Her point is that issues of power are enacted in the classroom, issues that must be acknowledged and problematized if students are to recognize, challenge, or confront this culture of power.

Delpit argues that naming and labeling the implicit codes of power are acts that extend to both teachers and students what we have called “the power to engage in the process of determining.” Therefore, educating in ways that are socially just requires that we explicitly address forms of cultural capital and cultural codes. “Basic” skills must be developed, while at the same time continuing to honor and move from the culture of the student. Parents, Delpit says, want to “ensure that the school provides their children with discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society” (p. 29). By withholding from students the cultural codes that enable success in that larger society (or by failing to make them explicit), teachers are “abdicating their duty to teach” (p. 31).

Although teachers who choose not to embrace a “child-centered” approach to teaching engage in acts of transgression, this should not be mistaken for a purely skills based approach to literacy. For Delpit, the skills/process debate is “fallacious; the dichotomy false” (p. 46). She sees the educative process as one that provides the skills and tools needed “within the context of meaningful communicative endeavor” (p. 45). Education is, on this account, a critical project, one that explicitly asks whose voices are missing, and why.

*Another facet of the resistance to “just” practices we propose here is one that arises when one finds one’s habitual actions or practices challenged or threatened by outside forces. Bourdieu (1992) defines “habitus” as a set of dispositions and pre-dispositions that result in the production of specific practices. When they act simply as they think or sense they should, individuals reinforce the action patterns and practices to which they are predisposed. Hence, in addition to “othering” “just” practices, we must transgress our own “know-how”—the comfort and certainty of familiar practices—accepting the fearful discomfort of uncertainty. How do we renounce the security of our own thoughts? How do we shake the commonsensical nature and feeling of our own ideologies? By naming social justice in a manner that is complex, fluid, changeable and ever-changing; by identifying and*

*problematizing how, when, why, to whose advantage, and from what standpoint social justice is named and thus names us, subsumes us.*

*If one situation's desirable norms can be another situation's acts of compliance, as suggested above, we would do well to introduce the idea of perspective, or "place," into our discussions. Cresswell posits that "place displays an air of obviousness," (p. 48) to which I would add that it plays an important role confirming and corroborating the "common-sense" of our thoughts and actions. We search for places to establish our behaviors, and our perceptions are "made clear" in those places. Thus, power is created through the ordering and controlling of space and place. The spaces we create or appropriate—this paper, this journal, this classroom, this institution, this space between teacher and student—delimit and define what we regard as normal. To what extent, then, do we normalize social justice by engaging in it only through particular and clearly (to us) defined places? When we engage in discourses of justice and change, of risk and possibility, do we at the same time render them safe by confining them to spaces habitually deemed appropriate? Do we, thus, construct the normative and the resistant at the same time? Do we present the challenge of change while at the same time neutering its charge by addressing it within the security of (implicitly) safe place? Does safety of place inevitably compromise our aspirations and intentions to "resist" and "transform"?*

*How can one learn to transgress the apparently natural?<sup>11</sup> One possibility is to acknowledge and engage with the differentiation process—the "logic of alterity"—that creates dichotomies like us/them, either/or, here/there. Another, is perhaps the challenge of unrelenting practices, as stated above, of connecting students and teachers to practices of "caring," thus reconnecting practices and beliefs to social roots and not merely places (which render them common and right and natural).*

### **Production of thought: social practice or a practice without justice?**

*Is it possible, then, that, as Althusser (2001) implies, we are caught in a double bind, and that our experiences/realities present a rather encircled complexity? In admittedly cumbersome language, Althusser proposes that not only do we reproduce our conditions, but the conditions of our engagements are predicated in and by the reproduction of these same conditions. Reproduction is not only accepted (and enacted again), but most importantly, our engagement with such acts create new needs, new forms for the re-instatement of*

reproduction itself. The issue, then, is not simply to challenge reproductive practices, but rather to locate ourselves within them, and in doing so de-naturalize these practices, and ourselves. But, can we manage such tasks? Moreover, can the transgression implied here be produced beyond a mere re-ordering?

Production can be construed, along Marxist lines, in material terms. But educational practices also involve a kind of production. What particularly interests and concerns me is the objectified notion of educational production that pervades and dominates current educational thought. Before production can occur, before socially just practices and the means of achieving them come into being, there must exist a need or a demand. What I find myself wondering, the question in my mind, is: To what extent and in what ways are the demand for and means of achieving social justice framed by processes of “othering”—by formalized and externalized processes that seek to define and objectively stipulate what socially just practices in education ought to be. As Delpit proposes, language can become, through an institutionalized vision otherwise deemed supportive, an element of oppression and distancing.

Just as labor power is reproduced through wages, social justice is (or at least can be) reproduced through the rhetoric of “just” practices. As wages create the conditions that enable further production without force or intervention by external power, so does the ideal of “just” practices dispose individuals to pursue social justice in education. Matters such as how just practices are construed, whether they are questioned or transgressed, are rendered inconsequential by the commonsensical nature of the engagement: a commonsensical mode of relating that nullifies the need—perhaps even the possibility—for critical engagement.

Thus, in the realm of education, particularly higher education, social justice can easily become preoccupied with the “ordering of thought”—an ordering that simply channels educators’ engagements into “appropriate,” “morally committed,” “just” actions and practices that, while intending critical thought and agency, often manifest exactly the opposite. The discourse of social justice is appropriated by the hierarchical structuring of those able to broadcast and hence define what social justice means. Moreover, because of its presumed intrinsic value, a purported commitment to practices that intend to lift and ameliorate the lives of the dispossessed and voiceless and those in need, the discourse of social justice is neither challenged nor seen as a space for personal construction and reconstruction.

### **Social justice and the pedagogical: redemption or transgression**

What, then, are socially just educational acts, and in whose instructional practices are they best exemplified? Are they to be found in African American teachers who focus on direct skill teaching within a context of “critical and creative thinking,” teachers who name and challenge codes of cultural conduct that are, as Delpit points out, “seemingly available to everyone” (p. 19)? Or are they to be found in altruistic, well-intending “progressive” educators who “allow” students to use their own cultural “voices” or dialects, teachers who view explicit communication and direct instruction as acts of oppression? Do these respective groups each claim, and thus privilege, a particular social justice discourse that makes of others “unequals, [and] inferiors” (hooks 2000, p. 13)? Are these positionings acts of “social redemption” or acts of transgression?

In what ways is social justice being reproduced in these very different conceptions of what it means to engage in just acts with one's students? How does each group (admittedly drawn selectively from a broad educative continuum for purposes of contrast here) challenge a system that in essence disparages the need for social justice? Each espouses a particular and distinctive rhetoric of what it means to educate in ways that are socially just. Do these respective rhetorics implicate *critical thought and agency*? Or do they instead inscribe and perpetuate, under the guise of social justice, what has “always been”? As the discourse of these groups seems diametrically opposite, with little communication between them, what systems of reproduction are being maintained?

What are the possibilities for dialogue between such disparate groups? The potential for broad-based, critical dialogue—grounded in thought that “perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity” (Freire 1970, p. 73)—seems tremendous. But the incalculable personal and social investment required by such dialogue and such thought presents a formidable barrier to asking what justice and just acts may be. Recognizing and naming assumptions are not enough. As Bohm (1996) asserts, genuine dialogue requires not only that we examine assumptions, but that we probe what “goes into the process of thought *behind* the assumptions...” (p. 9).

Each group desires social transformation and envisions its acts as just—as do all who believe in an educative process dedicated to the pursuit of “a society based upon maximum

individual freedom and autonomy” (Delpit 1995, p. 26). But desire and belief do not constitute social justice; nor do they take us beyond self-affirming assumptions.

The hope for social justice lies in the kind of dialogue in which we cease to exist as we have. Rather than being seduced (which suggests a lack of agency or mindfulness), subsumed, and *left orphaned by the words we use*, perhaps we can consider engaging in a dialogue of being and becoming who we are in the world, one that challenges our conceptions of normative practices: a pedagogy of just practices.

These just practices would constitute a “radical standpoint” (hooks 1990) from which the purpose of social justice would not just be ameliorative (an intent that often impedes critical reflection), but also the achievement of reciprocity—what Dewey (1916) describes as “a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 87). This radical standpoint would in essence embrace counter-hegemonic practices that have thus far been relegated to the margin. It would not deny or discount or appropriate the experiences of the “oppressed, exploited, colonized” (hooks 1990, p. 150). It would strive to name reality based on critical reflection and dialogue, “where relations are determined in and through encounter and not by identification” (ibid., p. 150)

In acting critically and making choices (shattering the illusory specter of choice framed by hegemony) one is transformed and thus transforms one's reality. As Noddings (2003) cautions, we should not attempt to transform the world but rather “[allow] ourselves to be transformed” (p. 34). Instead of attempting to change society, to act with the intent of benefiting others (which so easily and so often becomes a cost), we should strive to re-construct who we are through dialogical practices.

Delpit calls this emancipatory pedagogy; for Giroux (1983) it is radical pedagogy; for Freire, it is liberatory. For people like Banks (2004) and Sleeter, (1996, 1997), who frame multiculturalism as a practice of celebrating differences, it is a pedagogy that confronts all forms of discrimination and discriminatory practices. It is a pedagogy committed to making problematic power structures and conventional ways of being so that students may challenge taken-for-granted ways of knowing, and through these re-engagements become transformed. For hooks (1990) it is the kind of marginal place that “offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (p. 149).

What would these alternatives, these possible transgressions mean for us pedagogically? Might they yield a pedagogy that would allow both teacher-student and

student-teacher to name and counter, to interrogate methods and methodologies, to engage in multicultural dialogue, a practice of differences? Do they suggest a place in which we may transgress our own “know-how”—the comfort and certainty of familiar practices—and embrace, instead, *the fearful discomfort of uncertainty?*

### **What of the coupling: music education and social justice**

*Social justice must depart not from the concept itself, the tantalizing notion of a construct that implies universality and might apply universally, but rather from a careful and caring balance that acknowledges individuals at the center.*

*Discovering ways to engage in socially just educational practices is a process deeply linked to discoveries<sup>12</sup> of who we are. And as Taylor (1994) has observed, “On the social plane, the understanding that identities are formed in open dialogue, unshaped by a predefined social script, has made the politics of equal recognition more central and stressful” (p. 36). So we must bring identity and recognition into the realm of social justice, where recognition means not only providing aid; acting in favor of others; creating fair and “just” interactions, curricula, and opportunities (each connected in many ways to a sense of otherness and externality); but also self-recognition, self-awareness, and consciousness, which require that we attend as well to the unavoidable problem of misrecognition.<sup>13</sup> Understanding our own positions and their mediating roles in resistance, transgression, and reproduction, is essential to recognizing others, to seeing who and how we are in such engagements, and to understanding how misrecognition is formed in and by us.*

*Multicultural practices and their associated pedagogies provide useful illustrations of these points. Despite considerable importance and potential, multicultural strategies are all too often grounded in politics of difference (universalized difference), where everyone is to be recognized, but recognition comes to mean differencing. In such a vision, the ways individuals are in fact different are of little or no import: the point is merely to acknowledge the presence, the fact of difference—to identify, to name, and thus to inscribe it. Social justice runs the risk to be seen in much the same way,<sup>14</sup> where institutionalized forms of “acknowledging difference,” using institutional/formal forms of power and political force, become the co-opting elements that prevent social forms of justice.*

*Our experiences in music education, however, have also showed us the possibilities that are erected in the praxis of everyday engagements with the processes of teaching and learning.*

*We have witnessed for instance:*

- In-Service teachers, who struggle to create their own sense and forms of agency, connecting the realities of graduate and school work by leading and creating professional development that challenges the status quo of their local environments.
- *Students who, in conceptualizing the significance of understanding theory and practice together and the possibilities of thinking in multiple and complex ways, re-frame their research agendas, choosing to engage with research that focuses on, for instance: feminist parameters; discussions of gender and structure of formal music programs; understanding of politics and political action in student teachers' lives as well as their absence in teacher preparation; or the role of hegemonic practices in the interactions among administrators, teachers and students in one school.*
- A student—for whom tuition is only affordable because of his employment as a janitor at his University—discovering and interrogating the possibilities of philosophical and political thinking as they constitute and are situated in his own life.
- *Teachers who think through and find new language to name, and thus challenge realities of urban schools, particularly through departures from prescriptive curricula and politico-administrative streamlined instruction.*
- The re-thinking of curriculum and the development of teacher preparation in a charter school in which parameters of practice were challenged. In this case, while addressing understanding of traditional parameters and construction of literacy, teachers and students focused on development of problem-posing as a way to enter musical/lived discoveries and learnings.

We have come to this place to think our worlds together, to discuss who we are, in the attempt, always limited, of challenging our own assumptions. Our attention has been directed toward music education equity and social justice. What of these words? And more to the point, what of the coupling of the words music education, equity, and social justice? And why now? Why this topic, and to what end? We are mindful of the constraints that are placed upon our thinking the world together by considering this topic through the frame of music education. Does the convening of conferences and the gathering of writings suggest that social justice has become a convention, or that outside movements require that we, music educators, also address the issue? Should we, as people interested in music education, be considering unjust practices (perceived or otherwise) rendered by society against us? Should we perhaps consider the U.S.A.'s National Standards and the ways they were conceived to



counter unjust practices? Should we address, perhaps, what might be considered difference-blind treatments of our students, committed for instance in the name of “methods” and “methodology” in our classrooms?

We recognize that answers and suggestions are part of conventional scholarship but so are also the ensuing normative practices embedded in its spaces. While our use of rhetorical questions may strike some readers as evasive, we suggest that our essay be read otherwise. At the core of this paper lies a deep belief in the necessity to question how we engage with concepts—in this particular case, the concept of social justice. Moreover, we are keenly aware that answers can be interpreted as forms of power, the ability to “make rules for others”; for as Gruenewald (2003) proposes, “ultimately, the kinds of places that we acknowledge and make possible will determine the kinds and the quality of human life in our communities” (p. 637). Because of our desire to embody practices of reengagement, being left with more questions than answers helps us to determine our practice as well as our representation.

*For whom, then, social justice? From whence social justice? For what purpose social justice? With these questions in mind, the questions that provided the framework for this paper, we offer the following:*

- *A politics of pedagogy that is conscious of the various power systems and structures: the technology of power inscribed in conception and in the delivery of instruction.*
- *A reversal of the usual flow of educational “expertise” and the creation of new practices based upon resistance and transgression.*
- *Curricular understandings based upon multicultural notions of lived experiences and critical of difference-blind constructions.*
- *Epistemological understandings based upon place, space and care, leading to varied and multiple visions of what counts as knowledge.*

Finally, and perhaps because of the glorious nature of embracing the precarious practice of interrogating the improbable, as Shepard writes, “the problem may be more difficult to understand than it is to solve” (Shepard 1982, p.129).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The first version of this paper was presented at the International Conference for Equity and Social Justice in Music Education, October 2006. In an attempt to embody our text in our propositions we would like to acknowledge that while we share various points of departure in this paper we come from backgrounds that are quite varied and privileged in different ways.

<sup>2</sup> We are aware of the syntactical rules of engagement of the English language as well as what we have come to see as constraints of such impositions. We would like therefore, to invite the reader to consider how variance isn't merely a matter of rhetoric but the creation of spaces and possibilities for multiple and different kinds of understandings. Thus, in spaces where one would interpret (for instance) indefinite and definite articles as traditionally bounding the text, we choose rather an engagement with the poetics in and of theory.

<sup>3</sup> We would like to acknowledge the care-ful and attentive readings the reviewers gave to our paper. In the re-engagement, in and through their suggestions, we were able to bring more clarity and complexity not only to the paper but to our thinking.

<sup>4</sup> Such issues can be considered in terms of race and ethnicity as well as gender. In race studies, for example, post-racist theories speak of the lost of meaning of words when they become the conveyors not of aggression and violence, but of subtle and mute bias, segregation and racism. See, Paul Gilroy, (2000).

<sup>5</sup> While in this context we speak of impossibility as it relates to what is not certain, seen or immediate in engagements, Ellsworth (1998) uses the concept of impossibility connected to teaching as a constant reconstruction, therefore something impossible to be done, accomplished or finished.

<sup>6</sup> Implicit here is a theory of center and periphery as developed by many including the Brazilian Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1979), who spoke of the need for transgression of normalized parameters between colony and colonizer (despite the fact that he later, as president of Brazil, notoriously asked critics of his governmental policies to “forget what I have written!”). *Dependency and Development in Latin America*.

<sup>7</sup> An appropriate reference here would be the late writings of Herbert Marcuse. *An Essay of Liberation (1969)*, for example, suggests the negation and rejection of dominant consumer culture at the same time that it celebrates “outlawed” forms of enjoyment—so that transgression is seen both as violation (in the negating of status quo and in the embracing of marginal norms) and as transcendence (again in both negation and acceptance).

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion on space and place see, T. Cresswell (1996); D. Gruenewald (2003); H. Lefebvre (1974); E. Grosz (1999).

<sup>9</sup> At the time of the writing of this paper, Omaha, Nebraska passed a measure that divided the public schools into “three racially identifiable districts” (NY Times, April 15, 2006). This measure was a deliberate attempt to re-segregate schools so that “black educators [could] control schools in black areas.”

<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth discussion of “acting white” see Ogbu & Fordham (1983).

<sup>11</sup> Transgression,” like all concepts and engagements, carries within itself the potential for its own negation. In this case, that may take the form of the replication of the very norms we set out to challenge.

<sup>12</sup> Discoveries in the plural here is used advisedly, for this is a process of becoming and thus of constant change and re-engagement.

<sup>13</sup> The conception of consciousness is intended here according to the Freirian notion of conscientization, that is, a “consciousness of consciousness.” Its interaction with the idea of misrecognition comes from Bohm (1996) and Taylor (2004), who argue, albeit differently, for the necessity of acknowledging that we misrecognize situation, concepts, ideals, and that such misrecognitions, whether involuntary or intentional, shape perception, conception, action and behaviors. In other words, that we cannot recognize (as in understand) without misrecognizing at the same time, that is, misunderstanding.

<sup>14</sup> Such view can and has been conceptualized as an “inscription device” by Popkewitz (2004) and before him Foucault (1972).

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