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Teaching Students – Not Music

Statement of Personal Music Education Philosophy

Charlene Blondo

Northern State University

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INTRODUCTION

As I have been reading various philosophies of music education many statements have affected my thinking; however, there is one statement that encompasses all of them. My philosophy of music education can be summed up in this one statement: We teach children, not music. Viewing my profession as an educator to be one of service to the students, I believe that the students are the drivers in the classroom and my primary responsibility is to guide them so that their musical experiences will be personal and life-long. In order for this to be achieved, there must be a personal connection between what the students know and what they are learning, and they must be allowed to form a relationship with the music in order for the music to be fully experienced. To further explain, my philosophy will involve the following topics: music education – why teach music; ethics; what to teach and how to learn; learner and teacher; and colonization and multicultural considerations.

MUSIC EDUCATION – WHY TEACH MUSIC?

In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Music Education* (Bowman & Frega, 2012) many theories and philosophies about music education and why we should teach music are presented. I believe that they all contribute positively to the cause of music education. Even so, I believe that developing each individual student’s unique relationship with music ought to be priority. When this happens, students can benefit by having a life filled with musical experiences. If the role of education is to prepare students to function as productive members of society, to be effective it must be life-long, community-based, and oriented to the real-life experiences of the students.

ETHICS

Just as there are moral duty theories such as the Ten Commandments, there are duty theories in ethics. These theories in ethics translate into the rights of the students I teach and serve. As Thomas Regelski says in *Ethical Dimensions of School-Based Music Education* (2012), the first and most central ethical criterion is *the duty to provide the functional benefits for which the profession exists:* discernibly advancing the musical functioning of graduates. Specific duties and rights include:

1. Education should benefit the student, not the teacher.
2. No harm to the students – particularly physical harm caused by misuse of the body to create music as well as not improving musical skills central to students’ musical well-being.
3. Students to be safe is a duty that includes being safe from psychological harassment, manipulation, or harm.
4. Fair and just treatment of each student is a traditional duty.
5. Another traditional duty is beneficence toward the needy.
6. Free expression should not only be allowed but promoted.
7. Humanity should never be treated as a means.

In short, as a music educator, the needs of my students should be my priority – not the music program. I need to serve the students, not the outward reputation of myself or the school music program. Students have individual needs and goals that I must attend to in order to help students feel successful. Based on personal experiences, I believe in identifying special and individual needs of each student and doing what it takes to meet those needs. In serving the students it is important for me to have the professional knowledge of the functionality of the singing voice and stages of physical growth and development in order to ensure that the students are safe and free from harm that could happen with misuse of their voices, breath, and bodies in motion.

WHAT TO TEACH AND HOW TO LEARN

I believe all students have the right to learn music as cognitive, aesthetic and paraxial. This involves teaching the students basics of music theory and composition including notation, rhythm, concepts and terminology. Depending on the student’s level of understanding, we can move from basic concepts to deeper understanding.

The praxial approach, according to David Elliott (1995), is to have students make music. In doing so, students learn to feel the music internally and externally. They learn to use their bodies as musical instruments in addition to creating music through various other mechanical instruments. According to Elliott, the best way to learn music is hands on.

In the second edition of *A Philosophy of Music Education* (1989), Bennett Reimer states that music is purely aesthetic. His philosophy is that music should be taught for the sake of music because of its aesthetic nature. We can understand ourselves as a whole better because of our musical experiences. Those experiences become more profound as we deepen our proficiency in music listening, writing and performing.

LEARNER AND TEACHER

When describing what it means to be musically educated, John Dewey (2012) says the role of the teacher in music education is to assist students in learning music and musical concepts so that students can create their individual musical experiences. I must be knowledgeable in music and teaching and allow the classroom to be student-led. The role of the learner is to apply what he/she knows and make music. By making and experiencing music, the learner assumes the responsibility for his/her personal experience. In doing so, education serves its purpose of social renewal and expression.

COLONIZATION AND MULTICULTURAL

Polycarp Ikuenobe (2012) expresses that intellectual activity, thought, culture, and civilization are taken away when people are denied the right to a philosophy. It is important that students find a connection between music that is important to them and the music being learned in a school music program. While colonization limits our peripheral vision of what is acceptable and worthy music, decolonization encourages multicultural learning in the truest form – not by words alone. Music from other cultures should never be viewed as ‘third world’ music or missionary music. I believe students need to be given the opportunity to learn more music than what colonization deems appropriate. Students need to know that their music is worthwhile. Developing and encouraging students’ unique relationship to music ought to be a primary goal of music education. In order for music pedagogy to be culturally relevant and for students to form meaningful and enduring connections among school knowledge, family life, community, culture and personal interests, education must also work with the knowledge students bring to the classroom from their lives outside of school. We do not just live within a culture; we are the culture by virtue of our participation in it.

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