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MUSIC IN A DOUBLE BIND: INSTRUCTION BY NON-SPECIALISTS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

By LIORA BRESLER

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Based on a three-year ethnographic study, this article examines the instruction of music by elementary (nonspecialist) classroom teachers, its explicit and implicit messages, and the role of music within the school. The findings reveal that in spite of district and state curricular expectations, music instruction is scant. When music is present, it is delegated to the role of a vehicle for other ends—to illustrate a subject matter, to change pace, and to provide a background activity—rather than cherished for its intrinsic aesthetic/cognitive value. Barriers to an improved music curriculum include teachers' lack of knowledge, resources, and appropriate structures within an overall climate of pressure for academics. This pressure, communicated through vertical (hierarchical-based) as well as horizontal (peer-based) channels, places music in a double bind: On the one hand, music instruction fails to draw on its cognitive, higher-order aspects in accordance with curricular advocacies; on the other hand, it is marginalized for its dispensable role as entertainment.

The "Back to the Basics" movement and the severe budget cuts in the United States create a situation where funding for music specialists is among the first to go. As a result, more and more schools are cutting music specialist positions, leaving music to be taught by classroom teachers. Interestingly, these cuts often coincide with new, statewide requirements for rigorous arts curricula. The questions central to this paper are: What happens to music instruction when delegated to classroom teachers? Is it being taught? If so, when, how, and to what ends? What are the role and functions of music within the school? What are the implicit and explicit messages communicated about music?

The need for a description of programs in operation has been increasingly acknowledged within the field of music education. In her address for the Symposium on Research in General Music, "Needed Research in General Music," Eunice Boardman states that the goals of music education...
are agreed upon; however, the gap between the desired and the actual outcomes in research should be addressed:

Why is there such a gap between desired or stated outcomes and actual achievement by students? Until the profession can more clearly diagnose the reason for this discrepancy, research into specific aspects of general music . . . is basically useless. . . . It is at this level of problem clarification that research is needed.[ 6]

This article sets out to provide such a clarification.

Methodology

The focus on program offerings in their natural settings required an intensive, field-oriented case-study approach. A comprehensive theoretical account of qualitative methodology as it applies to music education research is presented elsewhere.[ 7] Here, I will refer briefly to those methodological issues that are directly relevant to the conceptualization of the study, the design, and the report.

This study is holistic, naturalistic, and field oriented, the field being the natural setting of the study. The emphasis is on observables: classroom teaching, school programs, and performances. The examined contexts include teachers' background and expertise, financial resources, and school and community values. The interest in the meanings that actions and events carry for participants and the seeking of the frames of reference and value commitments of those observed created an interplay between etic and emic issues.[ 8] As Y. Lincoln and E. Guba point out, the criteria for qualitative studies are epistemologically different from those of quantitative methodology, advocating transferability rather than generalizability.[ 9]

The Sites

The selected sites-Centennial School in Chicago, Washington and Prairie schools in Danville, Illinois[ 10] were ordinary schools, selected to touch a variety of demographics in a big city and in a small blue-collar town. Centennial, located in the north part of Chicago, housed 780 students in grades K-8 and 37 certified faculty. Minority students comprised 73 percent of the school population (40 percent blacks, 20 percent Hispanics, and 13 percent East Indians). Fifty percent of the students were entitled to free or reduced lunch. About 70 percent of the parents were single parents. The school had no music specialists.

In Danville, Washington School housed 820 students in grades 2-5 as well as most of the special programs in the Danville district and 60 certified faculty. Prairie, a K-1 school, housed 440 students and 20 certified faculty. Minority students in both schools comprised 41 percent of the school population (28 percent blacks, 10 percent Hispanics, and 3 percent Asians) and 60-65 percent of the students were entitled to free lunches. The Danville schools had music specialists,[ 11] but the positions had been reduced considerably because of recent budget cuts.

Altogether I spent 120 hours in Danville and 120 hours in Chicago during a full school year. I observed classroom teachers and music specialists teaching music across ability and grade (K-8)
levels and interviewed thirty-nine classroom teachers, three music specialists, and one retired
music specialist as well as school and district administrators. Materials analyzed included
transcribed interviews, district guidelines for music curricula, music textbooks, and resource
books for songs.

The Operational Curriculum

The general finding was that only a few classroom teachers included music as part of their
regular curriculum. Most teachers did not feel comfortable teaching music since they lacked a
formal music background and experience. Musical activities for classroom teachers were singing
and listening to music. The larger study revealed that only music specialists ventured into music
appreciation and theory. The following is a vignette from a music session at a Chicago
kindergarten.

Singing

9:12. The school day has just begun. The freshness of a new day is punctuated with the pledge
and the anthem. The twenty-two kindergartners seat themselves in semicircles on the soft carpet.
It's song time. And the song today is about spring. "What is the season we have right now?" asks
Donna Olson (classroom teacher) from the piano. "Spring" resonate the twenty-two children.
Olson: "I am going to sing this, then we'll sing it together; and then I want you to put in your
own words."

Accompanying herself with simple, sturdy tonic-dominant chords, she sings: "Springtime is
garden time." The short four lines completed, she motions to the class and they all join. The
melody is clear and accurate. The piano, a bit on the loud side, nearly covers the small voices,
but there is energy and rhythm as they chant.

Olson: "What else is springtime?" Joseph volunteers: "Rain." Another chord precedes the next
version: "Spring time is rainy time." More suggestions include "hot" and "cold" Olson cautions:
"Let's not only talk about the weather. What do we do in the spring? What do you see kids doing
outside?" "Planting time...... Playing time." And "planting time" then "playing time" they sing.
Joshua offers swimming. Olson: "I don't think swimming. What season is swimming?"
"Summer." "It's not quite summer yet." Chris suggests "morning." Olson: "Don't we have
mornings in other seasons, winter? summer? fall?" An awkward moment for Chris, but attention
soon drifts elsewhere. "What do we think of when we think of spring?" "Spring time is sun
time." [Olson with emphasis] "Sunny time! Right." And there goes another verse. "Okay, what
are some of the activities you are doing outside when you're playing? Spring time is park time,
Isn't it?" More verses of "riding bikes," "visiting friend," and "picnic time" for five more minutes,
until 9:25-time for the alphabet.

This kindergarten class received by far more music than any other classroom in the building, and
at a time of the day when the children were fresh and alert. Because of her musical training and
ability to perform, Ms. Olson was one of the "musical forces" in the school and an indispensable
asset to school programs. In her own classroom, she provided an accurate performance in terms
of pitch (melody), rhythm, and harmony. Music activities were a common starter for many
school days: singing familiar songs, learning new ones like the one we have just heard, or doing movement songs (e.g. "Ring Around the Rosie" or "Hokey Pokey").

There is a lot of repetition in the description. There is a lot of repetition in classroom fife. And in music. As we read the classroom descriptions, we are confronted with the fact that our tolerance level for repetition in real life situations is much different from our tolerance for repetition in text (granted its two-dimensional nature, lacking expressions, sounds, and movements). Music lies somewhere in the middle. Repetition is applauded pedagogically, especially for this agegroup. The nine repetitions of the musical verse, identical in all their planned aspects (melody and rhythm) and nearly identical in the unintended ones (articulation, loudness, agogics) are still within our tolerance limits. it is the words that need some change. And here it is that children's input is invited. They are asked to insert their traveling adjective into the song.

From a music education point of view, the children's singing indicated a readiness for further development. Their second and third verses of the song sounded secure and accurate. The teacher could have added some complexity by including a contrasting element of dynamics (loud versus soft), offering an alternative phrasing, adding some instrumentation (such as clapping hands or thumping feet), perhaps adding a simple variation to the melody of the rhythm. The fact that even Ms. Olson, one of the few teachers in the school who had musical training and who included music as a regular activity in her curriculum, did not do any of these things at any point during the year, that she did not mention them as part of her goals and future plans, reflects a lack of consciousness for musical possibilities. It was the verbal rather than the musical domain that provided her primary frame of reference and guided her sensitivities. Indeed, attention to musical parameters is typically not part of nonmusicians' thinking and is not included within the curriculum.

Out of the thirty-nine classroom teachers interviewed and the twentythree teachers observed in all three schools, only two or three kindergarten teachers (who had some musical training) included music regularly in their curriculum. In addition to teacher expertise, it was the legitimacy of nonverbal (musical, kinesthetic, and visual) activities in the preliterate state of this age group (combined with teachers' skill) that seemed to account for the regularity of the music activities. At the kindergarten level, the range of time allotted to music stretched from sixty minutes per week for the most musically inclined teacher to thirty minutes per year for some of the others.

Most of the thirty-nine classroom teachers said that they did not teach music because they could not sing or play. "Music? I don't sing. We play records once in a while, but that is it!" said one first-grade teacher. An eighth-grade teacher summarized her perception of classroom teachers' teaching music:

We can't have the classroom teachers teach music because they don't have the background, and they are not interested. Unless they have a beautiful voice, they're Eke the little child that can't function.

Classroom teachers were reluctant to teach music, more reluctant than they were to teach visual arts. They perceived music instructions as requiring special skills, special language, and
pedagogical practices that they did not have. Teachers lacked a formal musical background. Even if they had taken one or two music courses, the material was not perceived as relevant at the time, and the content was long forgotten because of the lack of continual practice. Almost all were musically illiterate--they couldn't read or write music, nor were they used to thinking in musical categories (e.g. phrases, articulation, dynamics, form). Even basic parameters such as melody and rhythm were often lacking. Lack of expertise interacted with teacher ability to draw on curricular organizers such as music textbooks or the use of a curricular guide provided by the district.

Listening

1:30. The Reading Improvement Program (RIP) second and third graders return to their classroom from recess. Ms. McClure stands near the door: "Everybody, I want you calm and quiet." They rest their heads on the table. She puts a record on the record player. The sounds of "American in Paris" fill the room. 1:32. The two aides correct papers. McClure talks with another teacher who just entered from the adjacent room. 1:34. Teacher leaves. Ms. McClure walks around the room. The juxtaposition of uniformly leaning heads and a classroom reminds me of a "Sleeping Beauty" scene. 1:36. Synchronized with an authentic cadence, she lifts the handle from the record player. Time for math.

Listening activities were often "hidden,"[ 12 ] rather than being part of the formal curriculum. As I became more immersed in the school, I stumbled on short listening episodes such as the one just described. The time designed for these activities was typically transition time from curricular to noncurricular activities-after recess, at the end of a day, week, semester, or before holidays. Teachers introduced listening to music as background to other activities such as eating, doing math exercises or art work, sometimes as relaxation. Jerry Sinnott, a second-grade teacher, played taped orchestral music, Rachmaninov, Dvorak, and other romantic composers at the beginning of the day, as well as other times. As we talked about these activities, he emphasized mood and concentration:

We listen to a lot of music. It's not always tied in to anything. It is just that during math time, if they're doing seat work there's music on. It just seems to go easier that way. If they have something to listen to, they won't talk. They'll concentrate on their work and let the music kind of wash the mood in. And during the seat work, after we set up an art lesson and they are coloring it. When they are finishing up, they will listen to music.

The theme of music as a background activity repeats itself across grade and ability levels. Ms. Wolf, an eighth-grade teacher, describes her music activities and touches on discipline problems involved in the listening:

At this point, what we have is music appreciation, listening, in the classroom. It's only by way of the radio. I try to include it during lunch time when they are eating. At lunch time it's such a free time. And that's the one time when you don't say "don't talk," but "keep it down, keep it low." Listening is kind of difficult . . . . Sometimes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, the last fifteen or twenty minutes of the hour is recreation or reading. So while they're reading or doing
something recreational, they're listening to some classical music. Of course, that doesn't always work because they want to talk.

And if the radio is on, they want to turn to their favorite music.

Typically, the music provided little focus for children and discipline proved problematic. The circumstances in which it is presented often make listening a self-defeating activity. Jay Knight, a third-grade teacher of the "gifted" class, describes some of the problems involved in his listening situations:

When we do our art classes, I play the radio. At home the kids listen to rock and roll and it is loud. So when you play it in the room they want to have it loud and then if they want to talk, they have to even talk louder. So what happens is, you just fight it, it keeps going up and up and up.

Listening to classical music used to be institutionalized. At one time, music was piped during lunchtime from the office throughout the building, classrooms, and halls. I questioned aloud, "Why listen to music?" Ms. Wolf:

I think it's good. It just kind of adds. I enjoy classical music although we know that young people don't appreciate it. They don't really know its importance. They say music has a way of soothing the beast in man, so I try to think in terms of soothing the beast in man at that time.

Not providing guidance in listening was typically the result of lack of knowledge in music appreciation. Sometimes, the lack of guidance was presented as a part of an "anti-elitist" credo. Ms. McClure, an RIP second/third grade teacher:

I appreciate good music a great deal. I don't have to know a lot about music. And I want my kids to understand that they don't have to know all of the great terms. You don't have to be wealthy to enjoy the arts, and I think a lot of times our society says to people [that they do].

Thus, rather than content knowledge, those teachers who incorporated music listening tried to share with their students their "personal" knowledge," the things that sustained and nourished them emotionally in their private lives. At best, teachers succeeded in communicating the power of music, creating a special ambience, promoting attentiveness. Marilyn Harrison, a kindergarten teacher with extensive musical background and an unusual dedication to music, often played classical music for the children. As she put on Vivaldi's Four Seasons concerti, her own listening provided a role model of careful attention. She preceded the music with some short comments, communicated in a soft, expressive voice:

Let's turn over on your tummies and relax. You don't have to go to sleep. We just need to relax for a while. This is listening music. It does not even have any words. There are no words to think about. We just listen. It makes you feel so good to listen to that nice music.

The regularity and quality of music in Harrison's class, as well as the receptivity of kindergarten-aged children, contributed to their attentiveness and willingness to experience music. However, as we have observed, listening within a classroom situation can often be less successful. While
the teacher's goal is often laudable, circumstances can prove problematic. Teachers had little
knowledge of ways to use these music episodes educationally or to create an aesthetic ambience.
Students' frame of reference and classroom conditions typically prevented a deeper
understanding and experience. In our conversations, teachers' loosely articulated goals were
purely on the affective level: to set a certain tone, to relax. Observations and conversations with
students revealed that this background music encouraged them to ignore music (much as they
ignore grocery-store and elevator music) and that students did not regard music as potential
source of knowledge or of emotional or intellectual investment.

The "hidden" role of music within the formal curriculum made it more amendable to qualitative
methodology. In fact, when I first asked teachers and principals about musical activities, these
activities were not mentioned. Part of that hiddenness was a result of the irregularity of music
activities, another part was the insecurity of teachers in what they were doing. Still a third part
was connected to the issue of accountability. Music was not included in the lesson plan, because
(teachers explained to me) lesson plans need to be as explicit as possible and include all relevant
materials, so that a substitute could carry on the activity. The music materials were often part of
aural tradition rather than being documented. Where teachers could read music, they often did
not have the music for the songs, but "just remembered them" (and substitutes, of course, could
not be expected to know how to read music). As in the accountability theme, what can't be fully
articulated isn't acknowledged in the formal documents, and when it isn't documented it is likely
to be ignored.

School Programs

Music was a regular part of festive holiday productions, in Christmas and spring productions,
opening and concluding honor programs. In Centennial School, all three Christmas programs (for
the three different grade levels) featured Ms. Olson's playing familiar songs; a short instrumental
section performed by the afterschool string music teacher and his four (playing) students
consisting of a simple version of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," and "Jingle Bells." Christmas
songs and carols were an important part of the culture. Edna Rice, the social science eighth-grade
teacher, who had a music background and conducted an afterschool music club, told me about
last year's holiday:

We caroled in the hallways, and the kids really liked that. We caroled for the office and then we
went up to the third floor. We went by and told the teachers if they wanted their children to
listen, to open the door. We got a very nice response from all the different rooms. They
applauded. Little kids liked that too. We sang the more popular songs to the lower grades:
"Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer"-those types of songs. When we got up to older kids, we sang
a little bit more complicated songs and some carols and stuff. We put on kind of like a little show
for the little kids, because they were familiar with those songs and some of the rooms had sung
them for the holiday program. If we were singing one of their songs they would sing with us,
which is really nice too.

In the absence of music specialists, the role of those classroom teachers with a musical expertise
was indispensable. Charles Brophy, a sixth-grade teacher and an accomplished weekend jazz
musician, had been assigned a role similar to those of Rice and Olson for the Black Gallery of Honor week. He said:

I had about seventy or eighty kids [pulled from the three classes he is teaching]. We sang in the hallway here "Ole Man River." Then during lunchtime, we went down to the second floor, and we sang there too, sort of a serenade like. The principal had everybody open their doors in the classroom. The children get a kick out of it.

Thus, the more musically skilled teachers led students caroling along the corridors and by the office to the delight and applause of teachers and students. Repertoire included the popular holiday or ethnic songs (depending on the occasion) as well as more sophisticated carols.

Pressures for Academics

As I chatted with teachers about their music practice, they invariably brought up the emic topic of the pressure for academics as a primary constraint for musical activities. Some, typically the primary-grade teachers, lamented the decrease in music. In contrast, upper-grade teachers often felt that teaching music in the school was not a priority, considering what students need to know in life.

Alicia Fernandez, a second-grade teacher, touches on the tension between the goals of learning academics and the need for self-expression, an issue touched by many others:

You almost feel pressured to keep the children advanced enough in their reading and math, and at the same time, meet their other needs, needs that they have to express themselves in other ways.

All teachers talked about what I call vertical pressure, which came from principals and superintendents. A few raised the issue of "horizontal pressure," exacted by their peers and colleagues, and discussed their conflict between wanting to include music versus the pressure to concentrate on academics.

At what grade level does the pressure for academics start? I started a search for the transition: from nonpressure to pressure. I began examining the lowest grade level--kindergarten-expecting only minimal pressure, if any. I asked Marylin Harrison, a kindergarten teacher, if she ever senses pressure for academic performance. Her answer came as a surprise:

We are told that we are responsible for the things that are in the curriculum guide. The kindergarten curriculum guide will give you a list of things in each subject that the children are supposed to have covered. That's district-wide. In that way you get some pressure through the administration, through the superintendent. A big deal is made about test scores. There is much emphasis on math this year because math achievements were low last year. Then you get pressure from some parents who hear about other kids that can do something and they want to be sure their kids are getting it too. They call the school or they call the superintendent or they talk with the child. A lot of pressure you put on yourself, because you want to be sure that your kids are really good and ready.
And then you get some pressure when you listen or talk with other teachers. Sometimes it's comforting to hear about other people in the same spot but at the same time, there are always a few who like to stick it at you. "My children are on page such and such and my children do this and my children do that." Kindergarten teachers get pressure from first grade teachers. When they get your kids, they put you down. They say, "I want to ask you about Joe Smith. Didn't you have him last year? Well, he does not know his letter sounds." So I think about Joe and I think about all the behavioral and socialization problems Joe had last year. The big thing for Joe and Joe's parents and me was when I got to send them a note saying "Joe had a good day." And they celebrated and I celebrated and Joe celebrated. Joe was all smiles because he had a terrible time getting along in school. It took us a long time to work it out. The test happened on the first week of school. One of the other teachers said: "What happened to review?" Joe has been home for three months. Because some of the teachers have so much pressure, and some of them are so academic, they start the year with full force. They want the kids to know all that when they get to nouns. And no matter how I feel or what I think about Joe, it puts pressure on me. It makes me feet, "Oh, my gosh. She thinks I should have taught him." I feel the pressure because I know that Joe has a real tough time, because he does not know his letter sounds.

All teachers talked about feeling guilty for taking time for music when there was little time in the school day for "the basics." In addition to music expertise and sensitivities, the lack of a legitimate time slot for music was one important difference between music specialists and classroom teachers. Teachers saw in the integration of the arts into academics a possible solution to minimize the loss of academic time. Thus, the pressure for academics led to the use of art as a vehicle rather than as a subject in its own right. Typical "integrated" activities consisted of short, quickly learned songs in conjunction with different content areas -vocabulary in the primary grades, science and social science topics in the upper grades. The low priority of the arts within the school was manifested in the low budgets allocated to it.

**Discussion Advocacies for Music Education**

The importance of music activities in elementary schools is acknowledged by aestheticians and music educators.[14] Within the academic community, advocacies emphasize affective, expressive, and aesthetic rationales, highlighting exploration, creativity, and inner directedness. The Getty ideas espousing the integration of conceptual development, skills development, a base of knowledge, and creativity provide another basis for music education.[15] Scholars advocate the importance of qualitative thinking in a variety of modes of representations,[16] and the development of multiple intelligences.[17] Howard Gardner critiques the unique, one-dimensional concept of intelligence and presents the notion of multiple intelligences, which includes bodily-kinesthetics and music as specialized intelligences. Eisner refers to music as a unique and important mode of representation, capturing experiences and meanings and crucial to an expanded view of knowledge.[18] The choice of a form of representation is a choice in the way the world will be conceived, as well as a choice in the way it will be publicly represented. Because curriculum conveys the past, but even more because it shapes consciousness,[19] establishing a curriculum defines the opportunities children will have to experience different forms of consciousness.
Interestingly, the rhetorics of state and district curriculum goals (see, for example, Illinois State Department of Education Curriculum Guide[20]) are heavily influenced by these scholarly advocacies, emphasizing the cognitive and knowledge-based nature of the discipline. The association of higher-order aspects with "elitism" (elitism being as unpopular within classroom teachers' circles as it was when the music education discipline established itself in the second half of the nineteenth century) is discussed elsewhere.[23]

Clearly, the school culture places music in a double bind: On the one hand, music instruction fails to draw on cognitive, higher-order aspects (in accordance with curricular advocacies); on the other hand, music is marginalized for its dispensable role as entertainment. Within a culture that regards the primary role of school as the development of students' base of knowledge and academic competencies, music as taught by lay people is perceived to be outside the esteemed territory. Stripped of its intellectual substance, music does not share in the school's primary values of knowledge. At the same time, its aesthetic aspects are viewed as "frills" within the current values.

It was music as entertainment that was more compatible with the other school goals such as cohesion, bringing together school and community, inculcation of traditions, and fitting with school productions for holidays. In the hands of untrained people, however, music often turned out to be superficial and simplistic, typically serving as a vehicle to other ends, rarely transcending to artistic and aesthetic levels.

Implications concern the necessity of expertise as well as institutional legitimation in the teaching of music. In order for music to excel, it needs to draw on its intrinsic aesthetic qualities, including the aesthetic integrating of the cognitive and affective domains.[22] Deep-rooted ideas shape our aspirations and behaviors. As long as the primacy of music in human knowledge remains unrecognized, music instruction is likely to remain as it is.

Notes

1. Conducted under the auspices of the National Center for Arts Education Research and funded by the National Endowment of the Arts. See L. Bresler, Arts Education in Danville, Illinois, A Report to the National Endowment of the Arts (Urbana-Champaign, Ill.: National Arts Education Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1988); L. Bresler, Arts Education in Chicago, Illinois. A Report to the National Endowment of the Arts (Urbana-Champaign, Ill.: National Arts Education Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1989); and R. Stake, L. Bresler, and L. Mabry, Custom and Cherishing: The Arts in Elementary Schools (Urbana, Ill.: Council for Research in Music Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1991).


6. Boardman, note 5 above, 8.


8. Those preconceived issues brought to the site by the researcher, and those brought by participants.


10. The names of the schools have been changed, as have the names of the teachers.

11. The issue of music specialists is elaborated upon in Stake et al., note 1 above.


17. Gardner, note 14 above.

18. Eisner, note 14 above.


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Adapted from the article of the same name in Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education 115 (Winter 1993): 1-13

**Liora Bresler** is an assistant professor of aesthetic education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and the Bureau of Educational Research at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.