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The Genre of School Music and its Shaping by Meso, Micro, and Macro Contexts

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Abstract

The meaning of any kind of music is inseparable from the conditions under which it is generated and experienced. The understanding of “school music” as a genre requires the understanding of the contexts that shape and define it. Contexts affect both what teachers teach and how they teach, shaping explicit and implicit messages and values. In this paper, I focus on the meso, institutional context--the structures and goals of the school system--, as they interact with the micro context--teachers’ commitments and expertise--, and the macro context--the larger cultural and societal values.

Introduction

The meaning of any kind of music is inseparable from the conditions under which it is generated and experienced. Religious music evolved in awe inspiring churches. Classical instrumental music emerged in the courts of kings and dukes, later on becoming a major factor in forming and shaping 19th century concert halls. Popular music received a boost with the invention of radio and record players, making it widely accessible to large populations.

The plurality of musics is recognized in contemporary society, where music is seen not as a monolithic idea or practice, but as filled with conflicting values and perspectives. We speak of music as timeless and transcendent. We also note music’s service to politics and propaganda, its function as a commodity. In contrast to classical and popular musical genres with their distinct contexts, formats, purposes, clientele, and value system, the contexts, format, clientele and
value system of “school music” as a separate genre are rarely discussed. Thus, school music is distinct from other genres, yet draws on them to re-frame and adapt to its unique goals and structures. This paper, based on two multi-year qualitative studies, examines the genre of school music in American elementary settings as reflected in the operational, day-to-day curricula (Goodad, et. al., 1979) and in teachers’ perceptions and reflections. The understanding of “school music” as a genre requires the understanding of the contexts that shape and define it. In this paper, I focus on the meso, institutional context -- the structures and goals of the school system --, as they interact with the micro context -- teachers’ beliefs and background --, and the macro context -- the larger cultural values.

Each of these three identified contexts is comprised of other, general and local contexts. The meso context, for example, draws on the tradition of music as a school subject; on the other arts subjects in the school and their relationship to music; on the particular school’s organization and mission; on the specific community in which the school is located, and the nature and extent of community/school interactions. Within the micro and macro levels, too, multiple contexts interact with each other to impact school music in myriad ways. Thus, it is the mutual shaping of contexts that creates the genre of school music. The following sections present “scenes” and interpretation from the operational music curriculum, where the influence of contexts and their interaction with each other can be observed.

**School Music**

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1 Important exceptions are Vulliamy (see, for example, 1975) and Shepherd et. al (1976) who examine the type of music used in British school, noting the prevalence of classical music and the absence of Jazz and popular music.

2 Context is defined as “the whole situation, background or environment relevant to some happening” (Grossman and Stodolsky, 1997, p. 181).
Unlike classical music, school music functions in contexts that are not commercial nor elitist. School music in the United States evolved in educational settings of the 19th century with the expansion of public school and mass education. Its incorporation into the general curriculum was a struggle from the very beginning, never quite assuming equal status with the academic disciplines which have constituted the foundations of schooling.

During the 150 years of its existence, elementary school music rode different ideological and pedagogical waves, assuming radically different functions: from serving the highly utilitarian goal of learning to read music for church singing, as well as the spiritual goal of praising the lord; through a humanistic ideology aimed at cultivating the mind and the spirit; to providing children means of self-expression and emotional outlet. Each of these goals generated different music curricula, contents and experiences. Ideologies aside, the contemporary reality of school music is tinged with the bare necessities of educational settings. The principals and administrators I talked with emphasized that music’s place at the curriculum existed primarily to comply with union requirements of providing release time for classroom teachers.

However, the role that music plays in elementary schools is more complex than providing release time. This role is at the same time marginal and central to the ways that schools establish their presence as institutions. The discipline of music is peripheral to the academic, core curriculum: school music is another disciplinary layer added to the many separate areas of instruction present in today’s schools. In this sense, it is a by-product of foundation ideas of curriculum that builds from the basics or essential knowledge outwards to the peripheral or less essential knowledge. The three R’s are at the center—and music, while more deeply institutionalized than something like an anti-drug program, exists on the outskirts. At the same time, many major moments at which the entire school comes together as a whole in performances for its
members and the larger community, center around music. These performances are unique to schools, serving school goals in their contents, formats, and style.

**Settings and Methods**

The two projects on which this paper is based focus on the operational curriculum of music, visual arts, dance, and drama in American elementary schools. The first study, a three-year project, was conducted under the auspices of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Center for Arts Education Research (see also Bresler, 1996; Stake, Bresler & Mabry, 1991). The second, a four-year project, was sponsored by the Bureau of Educational Research and the Research Board at the University of Illinois (for a methodological discussion, see Bresler, Wasser, Hertzog & Lemons, 1996).

The first study centered on three “average” schools, one in a large metropolitan city, two in a small industrial town. The second study examined two arts programs taught by specialists in two school districts: one program in a university town; the other in a small, industrial town. The focus of this paper is on music; the other arts serve as background context. Altogether, music data draws on five elementary schools, ranging from large (820 students) to mid-size (440 students). All schools had large minority populations with lower SES. In addition, the university town also had a middle class minority population of children of faculty and students involved with the university.

Data sources for both projects included: (1) intensive (nonparticipant) observations of arts and music instruction, as well as of after-school music clubs, in- and out-of-school music performances, and meetings of program specialists across arts subjects, (2) semi-structured interviews with teachers (classroom and specialists) and principals, and (3) analysis of materials such as music textbooks, students tests, and program notes. As case-studies go, there is no claim of representativeness or generalizability. Rather, the aim is to capture the richness, complexity, and contextuality of music education in its varied manifestations.
In these schools, music was taught by (i) music specialists (in four of the five schools); (ii) classroom teachers with an extensive background in music (in two of the schools); or (iii) classroom teachers with a minimal to average background in music (in the big city school where there were no specialists). Teachers in the latter category tended to avoid teaching music, but with no specialists, some felt they had to incorporate music activities.

There were more specialists teaching music, relative to the other arts. When given the option to choose a specialist in one subject area, music was the number one choice: classroom teachers felt less secure in teaching music, as compared, for example, with teaching the visual arts. The existence of specialists meant that in most classrooms music was taught regularly. Structures for music instruction included weekly 30 minutes lessons. In the district of the university town, music was one of four arts subjects taught by specialists who met regularly to discuss curricular issues. In the small, industrial town, music was the only art subject taught by specialists. In the big city school, music was taught by classroom teachers with varying backgrounds in music, ranging from a 4th grade teacher trained in music education, to a 6th grade teacher who was a jazz musician, to several teachers with extensive classical instrumental background and (on rare occasion) classroom teachers with no musical background.

**The Operational Music Curriculum**

One of the findings that emerged in the first project was the centrality of both the institutional and personal contexts of music specialists in shaping music instruction, contexts that are quite different from those of classroom teachers. This finding motivated the second project that focused specifically on the contexts of specialists. Hence the organization of vignettes according to professional background. The vignettes in the next section portray music taught by classroom teachers including a music performance for the whole school. The following section, focuses on vignettes of music specialists. The interpretive
sections refer to some of the immediate contexts that shape school music and are developed in a latter section discussing the three contexts.

**Music Taught by Classroom Teachers**

**Music for Holidays**

It is a chilly, Fall day, on Friday, October 14. 1:00 pm, just after recess. These first graders are still agitated. Faces are red, movements intense and somewhat jagged. Linda McHenry, a young, friendly teacher, closes the door so the singing won't disturb other classes. A chorus of “Autumn leaves are falling down” follows. In the next activity, Linda stands in front of the class playing an audio tape. There is noise of ghosts, wind, screams. Towards the end of the tape, McHenry distributes a “ditto” featuring a dainty, sad-looking ghost flying amidst Halloween pies and a simplified-sketched house. The tape announces that the lights are off, then ends abruptly with a shriek.

McHenry's voice is gentle and inviting participation as she asks: Where do you think we were?
Children: Haunted house.
McHenry: How did you know that you were in a haunted house? Use the sheet in front of you.

The light is on. The song of the day is short-four lines and relatively simple one, revolving around a major chord with a span of a seventh at its widest. Composed by McHenry’s music teacher in college, the words go like this:

Spooky shapes, cats and owls’
Listen to the wild dogs howl.
Witches fly, in the sky;
Tricks and treats and pumpkin pie!
McHenry sings it twice in an off-pitch tune with correct rhythmic patterns. A group of four chosen children echoes, then several other groups, each with correct rhythmic patterns and off-pitch. The children are selected on the basis of good behavior—thus, singing is presented as a prize of sorts. Jack, disruptive, is the one exception. It works. Jack straightens up and looks more alert for the following few minutes. Singers are asked to stand up, their posture in accordance with their central position. With five repetitions, the song gains familiarity.

The lesson ends with students asked to color the ditto sheet.

Music for Seasons

9:12 a.m. The school day has just begun. The freshness of a new day is punctuated with the Pledge of Allegiance and the National Anthem. Twenty-two kindergartners seat themselves in semi-circled rows on the light blue, soft carpet. It’s song time, and the song today is about spring.

"What is the season we have right now?" asks Gail Lowenfeld, the kindergarten teacher, from the piano. "Spring" resonate the 22 children. Lowenfeld: "I am going to sing this, 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 in the children’s chant.

Lowenfeld: "What else is springtime?" Joseph volunteers, "Rain," and another chord precedes the next version: "Springtime is rainy time." The next suggestions include "Hot" and "Cold." Lowenfeld 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 they sing, "planting time," then "playing time."
When taught by classroom teachers, music was typically presented in the context of holidays, seasons, or topics related to the academic aspects of the schools. In the learning of the songs in the two vignettes above, melody and rhythm were secondary to the lyrics, discussion of other parameters (e.g., harmony, dynamic, form) non-existent. In the Spring episode, the lesson was part of "pre-academics", expanding children's associations with seasons and their proper use of adjectives. Other musical activities in that category included the integration of songs on “academic” themes, like "The Planets" song sung in a fifth grade social science unit about the solar system, or “Fifty Nifty United States” in a Geography lesson.

These activities, conducted by classroom teachers with little expertise in music, derived their ideas from general classroom magazines and local traditions. Pedagogies were teacher-centered. Topics reflected goals-- the acquisition of academic content, rather than aesthetic experience, or the development of musical skills. In the interviews, teachers explained that students with different abilities and disabilities had more chance of success if they could work with varied forms of representation (e.g. visual, auditory). Music, teachers said, allowed them to teach “school knowledge” through forms other than the verbal and numerical.

Teachers’ beliefs and perception of music and how it fits with children’s needs shapes their practice. Another related context for music practice is the institutional context, the climate of the school and its priorities. Given the general pressure for academics, classroom teachers felt they did not have time to teach music as a separate subject. Molly Leonard, seventh-grade classroom teacher in a Chicago school, speaks for many others when she tells me:
Music and art are part of the curriculum all teachers are expected to teach. You don’t always have time to do it. If you want to teach music or art, you have to teach it included in another subject.

When taught by classroom teachers, music instruction was sporadic, depending on teachers’ interest and the specific occasion. Typically, it was allocated transition periods—after recess, beginning or end of the day, the week or the semester. Singing was a prevalent activity. Some teachers used music listening for these transition times or as background to “silent work” in other subjects. Contents were shaped by teacher knowledge, musical sensitivity and visions, pedagogical skills and the availability (or lack of) of instruments, and CD or tape player. Most classroom teachers do not use instruments—they are not available and teachers do not know how to use them. Though voice is technically available, more often than not it is not a “singing voice;” singing in pitch is not a “given” in our culture, a cultivated singing tone even less so. In a school context which highlights verbal literacy, vocabulary and words are central for classroom teachers, other musical elements ignored. For vocabulary, it was acquisition rather than interpretation or expression. The topics were presented in a schematized manner, centering on common knowledge, widely used sets of symbols and conventions. Seldom did teachers probe into deeper, personal or cultural meanings. This meso context, reflecting the values of the school (verbal literacy, academic topics) resonates with the macro context, society’s emphasis on literacy and its view of music as entertainment or mood altering device. In the case of classroom teachers, these meso and macro contexts are often central in shaping their views and beliefs, essentially when they have no alternative musical contexts. Teachers’ beliefs about the role of music in the school highlighted illustrating academic subjects, and the therapeutic function of “soothe the beast in the child”. It is these views of music on all three levels—
societal, institutional, and personal -- that enable the teaching of music we just observed by teachers with little musical background, few relevant skills, and no plans for their own future development in music.

Holiday Performances

Like music instruction, school performances were conducted either by music specialists or classroom teachers, depending on school resources and teachers’ attitudes and motivation. Music specialists were sometimes protective of the short instruction time they had. Music specialists wanted to make sure lessons were dedicated to the learning of high quality music, skills and concepts, rather than the contents and polish of the typical performance repertoire. For classroom teachers, performances often provided a reason for instruction in the absence of alternative, discipline based motivators. Music specialists, however, were aware of how performances can dilute their music goals and often resisted tailoring their lessons for performances. While this served to maintain their integrity and goals of music teaching, it also meant that they did not participate in those moments central to the school and its goals. Thus, school performances, like the following vignette, were often organized by classroom teachers. Topics and singing styles in performances mirrored classroom instruction. At the same time, they had their distinct goals and audiences, and corresponding formats and structures.

Christmas Programs:

Gail Lowenfeld, at the piano, plays popular Christmas songs from the music sheet. Santas are prevalent, one on stage, another peering from a huge sock hanging from a basket, still a third, this one real, slimmer and less jolly than the painted ones, with a white puffed beard that he keeps tugging at and sneakers visible below the

\(^3\) referring to lesson contents, including topics, skills, and activities.
black boots. Announcing the next skit, his mumbling voice does not carry past the second row. I am conscious of rhythmical thumps behind me and turn to see a one-year-old kicking rigorously.

The highlights—circus and tumblers—are repeated in all three shows for the different grade levels: tiger, lion, and elephants, as well as two magicians who put in and take out pink bunnies in black hats; Ballerinas in leotards and dance outfits are dancing. Teachers supervise and monitor from their place. Different grades take turns in singing popular Christmas songs. The songs ended, my newly-acquainted neighbor to my left, Fakra Imam, tells me that her older son has been practicing the song at home, as well as in school for the past two weeks.

Next comes the after-school instrumental music teacher, holding a guitar. His class—three young violinists and one guitarist—sit in front. They play one phrase each of “Twinkle,” “Jingle Bells,” and “Song of Joy” whose simplified arrangement omits the one interesting rhythmic pattern. The last song, “The Yellow Rose of Texas,” is sung by the teacher, accompanied by feeble voices of the students. The performance elicits a “Bravo” from one mother.

An international flavor is present in the intermediate and upper world, as well as other winter holidays: Hanukkah and the Chinese New Year. Each classroom honors a different holiday or country.

Christmas in Mexico is contextualized with information on Mexico—altitude, size, natural resources, cities. Including a dance and the singing of “Feliz Navidad,” this section features pinatas, and a striking native outfit worn by one of the girls. Next, a popular Israeli Hanukkah song is presented by children dressed in the national colors, white and blue. The section concludes with a presentation of historic background of the origin of the holiday, and some facts about Israel’s temperature and climate, its major exports, geography and demography. The Chinese New Year dance performers are clad in Chinese hats and carry a
golden dragon. The long, green, paper dragon, making a round, then collapsing on the floor, is as impressive and attention-getting as the noise of the fireworks. Christmas in Germany is represented by a full-laden table, as well as basic information about German cars, chemistry, music and philosophy. The ceremony ends with some more well-known Christmas songs. Edna Rice, an 8th grade teacher, conducts in graceful, articulated movements. There is energy and a sense of direction, in her gestures, in the sound, in the rhythm and harmonies.

Teachers congratulate each other. The principal acknowledges the communal effort decorations prepared by teachers and students, and the parents’ presence (“We are delighted. How meaningful it is for your children.”) Matt’s mother kisses him with obvious pride. Jason’s father hugs his son, and tells Ms. Osborne, the “creative arts” teacher, in charge of the performance, how happy he is to meet her at last. An elderly woman with a fur coat approaches her grandson. Raza joins his mother and younger brother for an approving comment.

Of all the roles of the arts in the school, the social one seemed to be the one that was most appreciated by school administrators, teachers and parents. Although academic achievement was the major, explicit aim of schooling, most principals value its social aspect, and school’s relations with the larger community of students’ families. Music seemed to be a primary tool for the social functions of schooling. Principals let the teachers know that they expected the students to perform. PTA meetings, ethnic evenings, and holiday and

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It was precisely because the administration valued the social function of art more than other functions that music specialists in one of our settings used it to send a message. When the “blue collar” town school budget was cut and music lessons reduced by one-third, music specialists decided to cancel the performances. This did not happen without a fight: one principal, for example, put pressure on classroom teachers to prepare a chorus to a PTA meeting in order to increase the number of people attending (“more parents would come because their kids were going to be in it”). Those teachers who cared deeply about students’ performances and PTA meetings and were willing to work on their own programs were put in a double-bind under double-pressure. The story had a happy ending: the music budget was restored and so were the holiday and PTA music programs.
honor programs, were viewed as opportunities for creating such a community. Observations of performances revealed diversity of presented cultures corresponding to the diversity of student population.

School programs were festive, providing a contrast to the routine and affording an opportunity for parents to share in school celebrations. Children in all grade levels performed in song, dance, and play. The programs consisted of well-known tunes, crafted, hand-made decorations, simplified folk dances, and teacher-created skits. Performances tended towards stereotypical content and style. Like instruction, emphasis was less on the education of audience or performers, and more on the production of ear and eye catching craft.

**Music Taught by Specialists**

In general, I found the differences among music specialists more striking than those among classroom teachers. They had to do with specific musical and extra-musical goals; with the range of music activities and contents of lessons; with the ways in which music was presented and framed. Goals, contents, and activities were intimately related with the images teachers held regarding their role in the classroom, as well as with the perceived role of music in their students’ and their own lives. The vignettes presented in this section were chosen to illustrate the rich variety of music instruction in elementary settings focusing on the framing of music, the contents, pedagogical styles, and management style.

**Concept driven curriculum**

It’s Wednesday morning, 9:55, mid-October. Pat Helfrich, a young, tall, blonde woman with permed, chin length hair is waiting for the next class in her large well-equipped music classroom. The 4th grade girls enter the large music room first, then boys. Students pick up their music books, sit in their assigned chairs, and carefully place their books underneath their chairs.
Pat is standing in the front-center. Today, she focuses on the task of practicing short rhythm patterns for a Halloween chant. “Last week you might remember that we were working on some rhythm. We clapped some of the rhythm patterns up here (motions to rhythm caterpillar made of construction paper, taped to the wall above the chalkboard), and we practiced making rhythm patterns with rhythm cards. Well, today we’re going to start a Halloween rhythm chant, and I will put the rhythms on the board. Some of these I know we haven’t practiced yet, so if you remember some of them from last year you might help us out.”

“School music” in Pat’s class was comprised of songs and listening selections chosen from the music textbooks series, sometimes from her personal song file (given to her by her mother, also an elementary music teacher). Songs were typically associated with the calendar year. However, contents and materials differed from those of classroom teachers.

Central to Pat’s instruction were the elements of music—melody, rhythm, harmony, form, and tone color—elements featured in the music textbooks (to which most specialists, but not classroom teachers, refer). Pat’s teaching, for example, related the concept of rhythm and the building of a music vocabulary to the development of specific musical skills, such as accurate singing, and the playing of percussive instruments. The “triadic” teaching foci of topic (Halloween), elements (rhythm), and the learning task (performing the rhythmic patterns), are reminiscent of academic content as are the form of the lesson and style of presentation. The caterpillar rhythm visual, too, is a common didactic elementary school bulletin board, manifested in various subject areas (e.g., spelling words or multiplication facts for caterpillar segments). The lessons include consistent evaluation and meticulous record-keeping.
Though the teaching of concepts and skills is characteristic of all academic school subjects, they are rarely part of principals’ expectation of Music. Pat articulates the difference in the principal’s expectations for school music—essentially “having fun,” and her own, emphasizing the sequential learning of concepts and skills.

“Even when I was hired I was really only hired to make sure that music was fun and I was told directly that I didn’t have to teach any concepts and I didn’t have to know about the staff or anything. I just smiled and said, “well, music will always be fun,” and I didn’t go into that I was really going to work around these other things and actually teach things while they had fun. The principal finally figured out that they are learning things on top of just having fun. We’re not just singing, we’re not just listening to records, we’re actually doing something.”

Pat presents music as a subject with a particular body of knowledge that is taught in an organized, sequential fashion, similar to other school subjects, and unlike music instruction by classroom teachers, which is often presented as a recreation or enrichment. Pat’s teaching is well planned, even-paced, systematic, and clear. The lesson follows questions and answers format and students are requested to raise their hands to speak. Children’s movement in Pat’s music lessons is limited. Pat’s instruction fits the school context in that students are seated in rows facing the front of the classroom, where Pat stands or sits at the piano. The organization of musical experience is conducive to effective classroom management, as well as the acquisition of concepts and basic musical skills. Music instruction also resembles academic subjects in that it is not centered around students’ artistic and aesthetic experiences, nor does it emphasize students’ interpretation, expression, and sense of ownership.

At the same time, we notice subject specific rituals to the teaching of music: (1) opening and closing songs, and procedures for entering and leaving the classroom; (2) “favorite fillers” for classes with a few minutes of extra time; (3)
music games to drill skills; (4) distribution of music books and xeroxed sheets; and (5) efficient management of instrument handling and exchange.

The specific organization of time and space are important aspects of school music. Equally powerful in the framing of music is Pat’s self presentation, conveyed in her “teacher’s look”, “teacher vocal tone” recognized as teacher speaking to students, style of clothing and discourse (for example, referring to herself in the third person, when she says “Ms. Helfrich would like to…”).

Management and discipline characterize all school subjects including music, providing the backbone to lesson contents and structures. Pat manages concurrently with teaching, praising, warning, suggesting, reminding, and enforcing with consistency. She uses an assertive discipline format in her classroom. There are clearly specified rules (and non-ambiguous consequences) for behavior: rules for performance, for instrument exchange, passing-out and pick-up. Writing names on the board leads to detentions.

Clearly, school’s structures and dominant teaching style shape Pat’s contents and pedagogies. Pat’s personal context-- professional and personal background and beliefs-- corroborates the school context to shape her teaching in the larger gesture, as well as in some of the micro level details. Pat’s mother, an elementary music teacher, provided a role model emphasizing consistency and a sense of “professionalism.” Pat started piano lessons in kindergarten with her mother as her teacher. In high school, Pat played the clarinet and “liked band,” but didn't want to teach instrumental music because “she was more of a piano player,” preferring to accompany than to perform:

“I'm not a performing person, like with piano, I’d rather accompany people than do a solo. I get too nervous. That’s when I decided I really liked elementary.”

Pat has a wide range of experiences in music and excellent singing and piano skills. At the time of the study, she was working towards her M.A. in music education in a nearby university whose program emphasized a conceptual
approach to music teaching. In her leisure time, she sang in the University Oratorio Society.

The personal micro context includes a race, an ethnicity with its subculture which can be similar or different from students’ subculture. Pat’s immediate past experience as a teacher was at an all white middle class school in Wisconsin, similar to her own background. Unlike that Wisconsin school, Pat does not feel a sense of community with the largely low class, Afro-American population of the small town school.

Music as singing experience

Kindergartners are seated in rows, in this large, and almost barren music room. The teacher, Jeff Lindsey, with a slight build and slightly long reddish-blond-gray hair, is wearing wire-rim glasses behind blue eyes. Jeff moves out from behind the piano, to have direct contact with the class. He weaves his music lesson together with a story, luring the young eager faces into the music experience. Jeff is animated, theatrical, dramatic, and spellbinding.

“I was in bed at night, and I heard a noise in the kitchen. So I got out of bed and went to see what it was. I heard this noise, and I slowly reached for the light switch (acting), and switch! (students jump) there they were! Crickets!...Everywhere! Partying down! And they were doing a dance and singing a song. This was the song they were singing." Jeff teaches the song and dance, which consists of twisting down at the ends of phrases where the pitches are mi-re-do. He stands in front of the piano and models the dance, then has students try it. The kids are excited, eager to do the cricket dance and sing the song.

Jeff: “Now there's one thing I've got to remind you of. Nobody's knees touch the floor, nobody's hands touch the floor, nobody's bottoms touch the
floor, but we just kind of go down like this. (models) Is everybody standin' nice and tall? Now, can we all stand up in front of our chairs, and when we sing, 'Everything is silent but the cricket's song' we go right on down, but not all the way down to the floor because it doesn't go down that far." (He begins playing boom-chick accompaniment) "Start out nice and tall" he shouts over the piano. Jeff sings and plays with students, singing words on the mi re do part, and doing the twisting dance. He then stops at the end of the song and says, "Now everybody did the dance just right; nobody got down on the floor; that means you get a big star (yea!! from class) But, I didn't hear words! (Jeff says emphatically) I've gotta hear people singing. (begins playing again.) Ready?" Jeff helps on the beginning of phrases and listens to the student singers. On the last phrase, he slows and softens the accompaniment and the children respond and sing/move making those same changes. "All right, good job! Have a seat."

In Jeff's class, “school music” consists primarily of folk songs, chosen for their suitability for the instructional sequence, and selected from folk song anthologies and music textbooks. Other repertoire includes calendar based songs (holiday, seasonal); school tradition (school songs for assemblies); "fillers" and "fun" songs; and music games (e.g., "name this tune", "decipher a song from notation"). Primarily taught as a large group, class rituals include vocal warm-ups; reward "stars" on the chalkboard for management purposes; and competition between groups of class members (boys vs. girls, row vs. row). Jeff uses the piano for song teaching and accompaniment. His artistic piano skills enhance the music by providing energy, interesting harmonies, a sense of musicality and variety. When Jeff has his own music room (in one of the two schools he teaches), he occasionally uses music instruments, primarily percussion, to accompany singing and reinforcing specific music elements.

Singing folk songs is central. Jeff uses rhythmic and melodic "pieces" of songs as organizing units for music instruction according to the Kodaly
approach, in this teaching vignette, Mi Re Do. He reinforces these sounds with body movement—the cricket's dance—in which the body moves down with the sounds of Mi Re Do at the end of each phrase in the song. Music hand signs (solfege) are often used as a device for student learning of the placement of notes in a musical scale. Jeff evaluates musical progress informally but regularly, providing students with feedback on pronunciation of words and on rhythm.

Enticing children to follow him through a sequence of musical skill building, Jeff emphasizes singing technique and music literacy. He draws pictures on the chalkboard for instructional, motivational, and managerial (stars) purposes, utilizing devices such as story-telling, modeling, visuals, and humor, keeping the tone light. Jeff's classes are teacher directed. He initiates, organizes, monitors. At the same time, his teaching style is interactive. He talks with students, (rather than talks to), incorporates their ideas. He uses a combination of a dramatic story-teller, a teacher's voice, and a conductor. Lessons move forward with smooth transitions between activities: Jeff weaves together music activities, stories, and classroom management.

There are several relevant contexts to Jeff’s teaching and some contexts that do not impact Jeff’s teaching. His background in the Kodaly Method, which highlights singing of folksongs (rather than concepts) shapes both his repertoire and instructional style. He is a church choir conductor, where music, rather than church, is the motivating force (says that if it weren't for the conducting, he wouldn't get up on Sunday mornings to go to church).

Jeff’s personal contexts affect his teaching. Music is his main interest in life; as he puts it, "music has been good to me." It was the expressive power of music that drew him to choose it as a career:

"I was in the sixth grade and we had a music teacher that traveled from room to room and she brought in a record one time of Peer Gynt Suite and put it on and I didn't know that such things existed and I knew that something was going to happen with music in my life. When I was 14 years old I decided that I wanted to be a
musician for a living, but I didn't know how to play anything so I started taking piano lessons at 14 and then when I was 17 or 18 I started college as a piano major.”

Professional background corroborates personal beliefs: Jeff believes that the experience of good singing is central. Musical aesthetics and individual pleasure and meaning are as important to him as are correct technique, pitch, and rhythm, the latter contributing to the former. Jeff regards the development of a repertoire of "quality" song literature as high priority, offering students experiences in singing technique, music notation, exposure to good folk song literature, and time for the sheer enjoyment of singing. The musical experience is a central goal:

“I am absolutely certain music is the wellspring from which everything else flows. Whatever feelings and well-being I'm able to bring to the children, whatever techniques I'm able to teach the children, whatever principles, it's got to come through music. Music is the most important thing and I find that in my job as a music teacher, when the music is good, everything else is good. If the music is well performed, and learned correctly, then everything else takes care of itself. I think that this is one way that people can learn to understand what beauty is and appreciate what is beautiful in life. I think that when the children learn music they need to learn music that they will bring something away from and carry it with them. That's why I don't do these stupid musical like, you know, Santa Claus goes to Duluth or something like that and these things that are published and hawked in these catalogs is so ridiculous. And I think that children should sing Mozart, Palestrina, Haydn, and I think they should do any of the higher arts of which they are capable, which are a lot, if you're taught well."

"I was trained as a classical musician. I know its a sin not to include Afro-Americans, Asian-American, and Hispanic Americans. Every culture has created great music. I think that only the best music should be taught to the kids, only the
absolute best music, and I think that it's imperative that every music teacher know what the best music is. A lot of them don't.

There are aspects of school context which Jeff does not share, like the “buzz words” of the field:

"Everybody talks about how the arts help to humanize people and all that, but nobody really believes it, because nobody really knows what humanizing and being human is.”

Another aspect that does not impact Jeff’s school music is the coordination of the arts (visual art, dance/drama and music) in his district around concepts (e.g., line, rhythm). Jeff purposely separates himself and his teaching from the rest of the school community, as well as from the other teachers in the integrated arts group, operating independently rather than as a team member.

Ethics and spirituality

Joey Green, a large, charismatic Afro-American woman, is singing and playing an accompaniment on the piano: "Listen with your eyes, listen with your eyes, listen with your eyes and you can sing one, too...Red and yellow and pink and green, purple and orange and blue, I can sing a rainbow..." Joey has created a strong rhythmic feel to the song, quite different from the gentle line used for this song. The singing is moderate and the sign language is delayed some. Tanesha is happily twisting from side to side in rhythm as she sings the song.

Joey: "The last time, let's do 'You (pointing to the class) can sing one too.' Let's try it. Let's do 'red and yellow', and at the very end what are we going to say?" Children together, speaking and signing: "You can sing one too." Joey: "All right.
(Students singing, Joey playing at a faster tempo) "Red and yellow..." (Joey shouts out song words at certain points.)

At the conclusion of the song, Joey immediately asks: "Who's a part of the rainbow?" Then, louder, faster, with more intensity, and at a higher pitch, "Who's a part of the rainbow?" One more time she asks, emphasizing each word, "who is a part of the rainbow???

Some students have hands raised, and some are shouting out, "All of us", "God is", "We are..." Joey: "We are! You make up this rainbow! I make up this rainbow! All right, you may sit down!" (They sit quickly.)

Joey waits 2 seconds, then begins the introduction to the funky, spiritual style Happy Birthday song. A girl stands in front of the class. Children point out that there is another girl with a birthday today, and a boy who had one since their last music class. Joey: "We have two people that have a birthday on the same day. Come on up. And one more!" (They sing the song twice through, inserting the words "all of you--" End of class, Joey "collects" her big birthday hugs, giving the kids warm, affectionate hugs.

In Joey’s class, "school music" consists of songs selected from the music textbooks or improvised by her, always connected to real-life issues. She emphasizes reading the words, understanding the meaning of the songs, and relating their pertinence to their lives. Joey’s music classes are organized around social and moral themes (e.g., kindness, connectedness, possibility and hope for all), and moral chants put to music (e.g., "Do Your Best; Throw Out the Rest"). Contents include song genres (e.g., holiday songs, nursery rhymes, patriotic songs, musicals), and festive music (e.g., Happy Birthday songs). Joey often develops the moral themes out of real-life current experiences of her students, such as respect for family and friends, or the power of effective and caring
communication. The song in the above vignette, for example, I Can Sing A Rainbow is the jumping-off point for a lesson about acceptance of differences between people. This moral theme is reinforced by using hand sign language along with the singing, to communicate with the hearing impaired. When holiday music is used in the classes, she emphasizes the message of the holiday (e.g., reflecting on the things we are grateful for-- family and friends-- on Thanksgiving Day, appreciation of soldiers who protect us on Veteran's Day).

Singing is the predominant activity, but there are also games (e.g., notation contest at the chalkboard, alphabet game), and movement activities, designed for a hard of hearing pre-schoolers group, or to help students learn to listen and follow directions. Materials include recordings and piano, sometimes a video. Joey often employs a “call and response” type of verbal interaction. Evaluation is informal, and immediate. She provides a safe environment for student expression (e.g., spontaneous clapping, movement to music). Classroom rituals include opening and closing songs; improvised “follow the directions” games for enlivening the class; singing row by row. Often, her music classes build to a point of musical performance, at which time she asks her students to stand and "sing the whole song, all the way through". Her piano accompaniment and the closure of a singing activity with a “performance” adds to the total musical experience, making class singing into an “event.”

Joey's teaching style, while large group, is highly personal. Aiming to touch each of the children. Joey's improvisatory ability at the piano is effective, and she uses the piano as a way to motivate and musically inspire her students. Her harmonies are exquisite, and her accompaniments, often in gospel or jazz style, are driving and forceful. Joey conveys a sense of drama in her music teaching, building tension in her classes by using her skills as a pianist, her voice, eyes and facial expressions through which she shows her conviction and passion for her students and the moral messages. Her instruction has a pace and an immediacy that contributes to the intensity of her message.
Ethics is also the foundation for Joey’s style of management. Her code of ethics prescribes that people should be nice to other people. When students infringe upon this code, Joey uses her enormous presence and power in her classes; one look, comment, or close proximity "fixes" a lot of problems. If a student misbehaves, Joey often discusses it openly with the entire class, making a "lesson" out of it. There is no discipline policy in place - no set of consequences, no formal rules, no referral to the office, no sign of detentions, no writing a student's name on the chalkboard, no sitting in the corner. Joey treats students with respect, admits her own mistakes, tries to be fair and explain the deep reasons behind certain "correct" behavior, and wants to help students behave in a manner that shows self-respect, believing that this will help them in life. She praises students quite often, and students clearly respond to her praise. She wants students to be happy and kind. Joey cares about the "whole" child, and his or her feelings, health, family situation, and self-esteem. She aspires to give them life-long skills and an understanding of how to succeed in the real world. The primary focus of her music teaching is to teach students to

"relate in a positive way to other people. To me music allows a child to express things that they may not express just because the music did something for them. I think folks have been afraid to say, ‘I love you,’ ‘I care about you.’ We’ve gotten so hard, and so I only care about folks I live with, I only care about the ones that are white just like me, or black just like me, and the rest of you all - phew (hand gesture down). And I think to be able to relate to certain songs can cause them (students) to have some feelings that they are not afraid to show. Our feelings are being suppressed."

Joey’s teaching draws on her personal contexts. Joey has been engaged in music, as she puts it, ever since "I was born." Her parents, though not musicians themselves, supported her emotionally, spiritually and financially, making sacrifices to give her piano lessons, which she began in Mississippi while in the
2nd grade. Joey received a scholarship after her freshman year in college, studying piano and voice, and graduated with a degree in music education and an elementary classroom certificate to ensure job security. After one year of teaching 2nd grade, she has taught general music ever since, including teaching music at segregated special education school.

She often mentions her family: parents that she is close to, a severely disabled husband, daughters, sons, and grandsons. In addition, Joey has an extended "family" at school. She is a loved and respected member in the school, in the administration building, and in the larger community, where she has lived for thirty years. She mentions positive comments, small gifts from parents and teachers. She also discusses the pressures of being a black woman in today’s society. Her own life has not been easy, and she says that the only way she has strength to go on is through her strong religious belief. She believes that students, too, will be "saved" if they can get to church and believe in Jesus. She has been involved in church music all of her life, and that experience is reflected in her music teaching - both in her musical skills (piano playing style), her moral emphasis and interaction style with students, and in her activities in the gospel choir that meets after school on Wednesdays.

Summary

Music instruction by both classroom teachers and specialists shares common patterns. Topics in music (like in the visual arts and drama, and unlike academic subjects), revolve around the calendar--holidays, seasons, and special events. This choice of topics fits with the role of music and the arts in the school, regarded primarily as serving to celebrate national and school functions. School view of music reflects larger cultural traditions as well as the personal beliefs and visions of individual teachers.

Music instruction at the school is teacher centered and large group. Teaching style is highly prescriptive. Unlike visual arts activities which often
focus on students’ compositions, music instruction rarely calls for individual creative endeavors. This instructional style fits with the formats and structures of schooling which are, by and large, group and teacher centered. The framing of music, however, varied from teacher to teacher, ranging from didactic to experiential.

Discipline and classroom management, central to the school context, shape all music instruction. The particular style in which this is conducted varies: from an emphasis on dutiful obedience, motivated by extrinsic rewards and penalties; through using the intrinsic power of music as motivator; to the emphasis of a moral and spiritual dimension as an integral part of life. Here, teachers’ personal contexts and visions were central in shaping their instruction, sometimes corroborating and conforming with institutional choices, at other times drawing on out of school contexts—musical and non-musical.

Singing “calendar music” was common across all teaching, however, lesson contents varied greatly when taught by specialists as compared with classroom teachers. Classroom teachers often integrated music into their academic teaching. Specialists opted for specialized contents, including the cultivation of fine and accurate singing tone, notation and skills of playing instruments. Thus, classroom teachers’ criteria for selection was mostly based on topics, whereas specialists typically considered musical concepts and skills. In addition, specialists incorporated guided listening to classical music, drawing on activities like conducting, describing rhythms, orchestration and moods. These classical music activities provided a supplement to singing and the development of concepts. They included contexts of music history, typically some basic information on composer and dates, in contrast to folk and ethnic repertoire which were edited and decontextualized.

School music, then, consisted of traditional and patriotic music; folk; “multicultural” music; and classical. As a rule, music instruction avoided the more popular genres of Jazz, pop, and rock, although Jazz and pop did “creep
in”, for example, in Joey’s improvisation of “Happy Birthday”, or in Jeff’s singing of “It’s a small world.” Composition was absent as was the use of Avant-Garde, classical music.

Differences in music instruction had to do with (a) teachers’ goals, both musical and non-musical. These goals can be combined, but, typically there was one set that was overriding in all teaching for any single teacher; (b) criteria for musical choices, both in the lyrics and in musical contents. Criteria were shaped by goals as well as by teaching method (e.g., Kodaly; Orff; Generative); (c) the amount of structure and planning in teachers’ music lessons, ranging from highly planned to mainly improvised; (d) teaching style, ranging from prescriptive to interactive, from distanced to the personal; from the didactic to the dramatic and the enticing; (e) emphasis on students’ emotional, intellectual and aesthetic engagement with the music, and the extent of invitation of student expressions of ideas and feelings; and (f) the extent to which music was presented as a communal activity, both within the school community, and in the larger community.

The differences in lesson contents can be attributed to the varied contexts classroom teachers and music specialists draw upon. Classroom teachers often associated music with entertainment or ambiance, sometimes with church functions. They also perceived that church and popular music repertoires were not appropriate to school: church contents are explicitly prohibited, whereas popular music is implicitly discouraged by its cultural associations. That left them with a narrower repertoire of traditional music. Their lack of emphasis on musical ideas and skills can be attributed to the fact that classroom teachers are often passive consumers of music. They often don’t possess musical skills and consequently don’t know how to teach them. In contrast, music specialists are exposed to wider repertoires of “legitimate” music (e.g., classical). Their out-of-school worlds often include additional music contexts, like singing in professional and semi-professional choirs, playing or conducting church music.
Their teacher education background provides them with extensive teaching techniques, and the types of musical activities they use is richer, serving to develop specific musical skills. These musical and educational contexts offer broader visions of music, and of teaching strategies. Here, macro and micro levels are brought together and shaped by the meso level to create the genre of school music.

**Contexts for School Music**

*Meso-level, institutional context:*

The institutional context of classroom teachers is different from that of music specialists. Classroom teachers are responsible for the teaching of academics as the central mission. That expectation leads them to use music (and other arts) as subservient to academic subjects and not on their own right. They regarded the use of music for holidays as a relief from the rigor or tedium of academic contents, rather than the teaching of an important subject on its own.

The contexts of elementary music specialists are quite different in that specialists represent a distinctive subculture within schools, where theirs is frequently the only subject that is not taught by classroom teachers. Hence, their position, a marginalized one, as “the other” teacher. The institutional view of music and of music specialists as dispensable is reflected in the allocation of space. One's own room is a highly significant possession in school terms, symbolizing professionalism, autonomy, and self-control. In their room teachers have control over use of materials and rules for comportment, autonomy that is lacking in most other arenas of teacher life. It is indicative of the image of music within schools that some of the observed schools had no rooms for music, in contrast to regular teachers’ classrooms, as well as to libraries, gyms, offices for social workers and counselors. Allocation of time, too, is indicative of status within the school. Classroom teachers could teach music whenever they wanted but often chose times of low concentration-- after recess, end of day. Music
specialists’ sessions were spread through the day, but had a weekly 30 minute slot with a whole week spacing between lessons, which is not conducive to building skills.

These constraints of time and space, and the related dynamics with classroom teachers create added technical and emotional pressure for music specialists. I observed classroom teachers being late to pick up their students from the music room. When music was taught in homerooms, some classroom teachers monitored music teaching, interfering with instruction in what they felt was their “territories.” Thus, the ability to negotiate positively with classroom teachers and to create allies among different faculty members is central for specialists. There are additional factors which shape the status of music specialists in the school, and, consequently, the status they can lend to their music in the school. Classroom control is one such factor, where quiet and order frequently become more important than experimentation with sound and discussion of ideas.

The constraints imposed upon behavior in school music shaped all music classes. School etiquette inhibits freedom of movement (in contrast to out of school music where movement often accompanies music integrally). schooling undermines elements of social learning which are conducive to “real” performances, like spontaneous feedback and applause from others, elements that are so important in out of school contexts.

The respective roles of teachers and students shape style and contents. The prescribed physical space among children reflects the fact that children learn beside each other, not from each other, in an environment where the teacher is the single conveyor of authorized knowledge. The psychological distance from the teacher, reflected in “teacher’s voice,” and the third person use that some teachers adopt, can be antithetical to a sense of togetherness in creating an experience. School music is contrasted with informal settings, where (Harwood 1998; Garrison 1985) the distinctions between the roles of performers, listeners and critics are blurred. Though everybody performs in the classroom situation,
whether musically or answering questions, there is little emphasis on listening to others, on applause and celebration. The performance and expression of music is often tightly controlled. The school context limits what children do musically and typically frames the experience as drill rather than “real”. I find it interesting that of all arts, it is school music that has the most prescriptive, least improvisatory orientation.

School etiquette is derived from the need to make sure all students are “successful” in mastering basic skills. Hence, a didactic, line-by-line presentation of new songs, rather than, for example, a repeated listening to the full song, which allows children independent access to the song.

In the absence of a social community for learning, aesthetic experience, and intrinsic musical rewards, management becomes a major teaching tool. Discipline has to rely on external rewards, whether it’s stars or detentions. Unless it is in the hands of charismatic, engaging teachers like Joey and Jeff, music can become dry or decorative.

Another “meso” aspect has to do with the specific mission and environment of the particular school. In the “blue-collar” school, for example, school mission included a moral stance, promoting the existence of spiritual flavor and an after-school gospel choir. In another low SES school which strove at a good self-representation within the community, an “elite” choir was allowed. The interrelated arts program in a whole school district shaped contents of all the other arts except music, where the teacher, for professional and personal reasons, resisted participation in that mission.

**Micro level: teachers backgrounds and commitments.**

Current research on teacher knowledge has broadened the conception of teacher knowledge beyond formal knowledge to include teachers’ personal knowledge about teaching. Teaching is also seen to be connected to their
personal, biographical experience (see for example Connely and Clandinin, 1990; Osborne, 1998).

Those classroom teachers with little music background have few musical contexts that support their teaching and few pedagogical strategies to teach musical skills. Conversations with classroom teachers revealed that their out of school contexts are typically consumers’ experiences; on the radio; on TV; in grocery stores and elevators; in entertainment shows; sometimes in churches. Contexts shape musical visions. The implicit messages of the popular contexts accounted for the “hidden” music curricula (background music played during and after recess, and as an accompaniment to drill in math). The lack of musical contexts in which teachers played an active role accounts for their lack of a participatory stance. For those who encountered only “decorative” background music, this also meant a lack of vision of what makes music inspiring, uplifting, beautiful (in contrast to “nice” and “cute”).

In contrast, out of the school musical contexts of specialists often involved them actively, mostly as performer and conductors in various musical choirs and ensembles. Specialists created their teaching images out of these multiple contexts: from a more didactic role, similar to that of teaching academic subjects, through that of a spiritual leader involving one’s followers in meaningful spiritual/ musical church experiences, to the charismatic conductor where it is the singing of music that exerts its magical powers. Images generate goals, which in turn shape choices of repertoire: from songs designed to exemplify particular topics, concepts, or musical skills, to music which is highly aesthetic, inspiring and uplifting. Even seemingly small details like the style of piano accompaniment reflect these images, and communicate implicit but powerful messages about the nature and role of music in life.

**Macro level: Music as a discipline, and in the general culture.**
Instruction has its roots in cultural discourses and folkways of teaching, as well as values of the larger culture. The finding that school subjects differ in their relative status and place within the world of schools, comes as no surprise and is well-supported by the scholarly literature on general school subjects (e.g., Grossman & Stodolsky, 1997). The role of the subject in the society and its reward system and status provide a central context. Sandholtz found that “the importance society placed on certain subject areas provided additional psychic reward for teachers by increasing the value placed on the teacher’s work (in Grossman & Stodolsky, 1997; p. 26). The reverse, of course is true as well: teachers of less valued subjects, like music, often experience fewer psychic rewards (Cox, 1998).

The particular disciplines included in school music (e.g., production, composition, history), too, reflect the larger sub-cultures of music. This happens at the university hierarchy as well as in the society at large. In American universities, course offerings in music education departments offer little in the way of music composition and improvisation. Here, too, schools and universities reflect the general tone of the society. Within an “instant” culture, it is difficult to support composition, which is never instant. The generation of new musical ideas and expression can take weeks, if not months, and polished products are difficult to guarantee.

Another aspect where the operational music curriculum is grounded in the larger culture, is in advocacies of multiculturalism. The inclusion of multicultural themes and musics mirrors their treatment in the society: often a superficial rather than interpretive or experiential exposure to musics of other cultures. Classroom instruction as well as holiday programs feature songs, presented in a decontextualized fashion, or with a “thin” factual (rather than experiential) context. This narrow view of multiculturalism reflects a dutiful “lip

5 In another study I conducted in high school arts academy, those teachers who did not teach in arts subjects felt marginalized and “looked down” by students (Bresler, 1997).
service” stance, rather than a curious attitude recognizing complexity and drawing on students’ personal experiences.

The educational context of the United States provides another macro context for school music. In a country whose education system is de-centralized, curriculum reform has different dynamics as compared with more centralized systems. The autonomy allowed to teachers, especially in the arts, permits them to teach what they care about and what they feel most comfortable with. It allows the idiosyncrasies of the Joeys of this world. At the same time, that autonomy means that teachers are not required to push themselves beyond their “comfort zone”.

Teachers’ autonomy reflects dialogical relationships of the educational priorities and values in the society. Principals’ concern with test scores of academic subjects mirrors society’s emphasis on industrial competitiveness, material achievement, money and success as symbolizing self and cultural worth. Within these larger, widely accepted values which prioritize academics, there are other value systems operating: the church and its notions of community and spirituality; the context of leisure time and entertainment. School music borrows from all these different music worlds, yet is tailored by the individual teacher in the particular setting.

The exploration of how musical forms and practices are transformed or created as they enter the embrace of the institution exemplifies the tensions between schools and music. The examination of school music as a genre allows us to observe some of the structural, curricular, personal and societal dimensions, the general characteristics, as well as variations and complexities.

References


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