

## **Curriculum Dis-chord: Exposing Inequality in Music Education** **John L. Vitale**

*Over the course of my personal and professional life, I have witnessed and been a part of many wonderful musical experiences in our publicly funded school system. This article, however, is not about these experiences. Rather, it is about exposing the flip side of the coin -- the inequality that currently exists within music education in our publicly funded schools. Music education is not only a legal right, it is an indispensable component of all education and indeed the human experience.*

### **Introduction:**

*This land is your land and this land is my land, sure,  
but the world is run by those that never listen to music anyway.*

*Bob Dylan*

What would life on this planet be like without music? Would parents find a substitute for singing a lullaby when comforting their crying infant? Would pre-school students find a better method of learning the alphabet than through music? Think about the significant role that music plays during the most important celebrations in life such as birthdays, weddings, graduations, dances, holidays, holy days, ceremonies, and even death itself. From the cradle to the grave, musical experiences are deeply imbued into the very fabric of daily life (Gregory, 1997). Yet music education continues to endure marginalization in many of our public schools (Pio, 2007; Jorgensen 2003), a fact to which I can personally attest as a parent, secondary school music teacher, teacher educator, and professional performer. This article is an opportunity for me to share my experiences.

### **As a Parent: Inequality Between Schools**

*While we try to teach our children all about life,  
our children teach us what life is all about.*

*Angela Schwindt*

My two sons (now aged nine and 11) attended a publicly funded elementary school in an upper middle class suburb of Toronto between 2003 and 2008, and received virtually no music education during this time. Whatever they did receive in was paltry at best, had a user fee attached to it in order to pay for an external music teacher, and only came into fruition after I had rallied a number of parents to petition the administration of the school. This means that the music curriculum (as set by the Ministry of Education for the entire province of Ontario) was not being followed at this school -- no curriculum compliance. Children of this publicly funded school in an affluent area of the country's largest city were denied their democratic right to receive music education as mandated by a legislative body of the Ontario government.

After several years of constant lobbying for adequate music education at this school with minimal success, I grew tired and disillusioned and enrolled my children into a different publicly funded school (about ten minutes away by car) at the

beginning of the 2008-2009 academic year. Within their first year, both of my children each received quality music instruction from a certified music teacher where curriculum compliance was exceptional. Both of my children even played in the school's Junior Band (one played clarinet and the other played alto saxophone), which included two separate performances at the school and one off-site performance at Ontario Place in downtown Toronto.

As a parent I was exposed to this stark contrast in the quality of music curriculum delivery between two publicly funded elementary schools only ten minutes apart in the Greater Toronto Area. One school had a vibrant and healthy music program, while the other school barely had a pulse when it came to music education. Although my children are now benefitting from outstanding music instruction, many students at their former school continue to be denied their right to quality music education.

### **As a Teacher: Inequality Within the Curriculum**

*Let the potential artist in our children come to life  
that they may surmount industrial monotonies and pressures.*

*Barbara Morgan*

As a music teacher with 12 years of experience at three different high schools, I have come to the conclusion that music curriculum is generally non-inclusive and even oppressive to certain students. This is particularly so for individuals who are attracted to music, but are turned off by traditional, Western-based music curriculum. Every high school, for example, seems to have a large number of students that play a typically rock-based musical instrument (i.e. electric guitar, electric bass, and drums). These students are commonly referred to as metal heads or rockers, terms that they themselves use to self-identify. Although they are attracted to the music room, many of these students resist enrolling in music courses because the concept of choir and wind orchestra, for example, are so far removed from their own life experiences (and this does not even begin to address students who are far more interested in non-Western-based music representing a plurality of cultures that is consistently marginalized and dismissed by a narrowly-focused music curriculum). Yet, their numbers are far too large to be ignored, particularly in an optional program that would benefit from further enrollment.

In the past, I have actively recruited these students and used alternative pedagogy and curriculum with them based on their interests, needs, and goals (Holt, 1981). For example, I always provided these students with large chunks of free time in the music class where they experimented with instruments and music that they found interesting and exciting. The students referred to this unstructured and peer-directed learning experience (Green, 2008, 2001; Soderman & Folkestad, 2004) as "jam time." In fact, "jam time" often produced rich and vibrant musical experiences that were often shared with the larger community during holiday and spring concerts.

As music teachers, we need to remove the bias from music curriculum and promote equality, inclusiveness, and democracy (Friere, 1998) for all students, regardless of what music they identify with and what instrument they play. Changes to the recently revised music curriculum in Ontario have advocated for choice and

further inclusion of different musical styles. Such changes, however, are still meager and need further amendments and modifications.

### **As a Teacher Educator: Inequality Within Schools**

*Don't waste life in doubts and fears; spend yourself on the work before you, well assured that the right performance of this hour's duties will be the best preparation for the hours and ages that will follow it.*

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

As a teacher educator of general curriculum studies at the junior and intermediate levels, I have had many discussions with my students about their practicum experiences in a variety of school boards all across Ontario. I have also had the opportunity to visit several schools across the province of Ontario where I engaged in a number of informal conversations with associate teachers, administrators and students. Through these discussions, it became fairly evident that music curriculum compliance is not followed in many publicly funded schools, particularly at the elementary level (as was the case in the first elementary school my children attended).

One of the reasons for below standard curriculum compliance is a lack of music training for pre-service teachers. The number of hours that teacher candidates receive in music education at the primary/junior and junior/intermediate level is insufficient (sometimes as few as 18 hours) which may prompt many in-service teachers to compensate in other ways including: watering down the music curriculum, reducing instructional time, and in some cases eliminating music as a stand-alone subject altogether, opting for an integrated approach to teaching music within the other disciplines. Many school boards are aware of this situation, and yet provide little or no in-service support for their teachers, despite the fact that a formal evaluation in music must be provided on provincial report cards.

I can remember one young student in grade eight who informed me that all she did in music was write about her favourite bands and singers; no performance, theory, or listening-based curriculum whatsoever. Yet a mark in music was formally assigned on this student's report card.

A discussion I had with an associate teacher at another nearby school reinforces this point. This particular teacher lamented that he did not have the proper knowledge or training to teach music at the grade eight level, yet he was expected to do it, as the school did not have certified music specialists. Consequently, his music curriculum simply consisted of music listening and nothing else. But compare this reality to a specific expectation from the Ontario music curriculum (2009) to see how some schools and students are being shortchanged by the mismatch between requirements and reality:

**C1.2** apply the elements of music [duration, pitch, dynamics, timbre, texture/harmony, and form] through performing, composing, and arranging music for a specific effect or clear purpose (*e.g., create a jingle to advertise a product; improvise a simple melody over a 12-bar blues progression; arrange a piece of their choice from their method book for a quartet of mixed instruments*) (p. 152).

This is not intended to blame the teacher who was obviously placed in an impossible situation, but rather to expose a larger systemic problem that many school and board administrators have created. Music education is deemed to be expendable, or at the very least, not important enough to warrant expenditures from hiring music certified teachers. This systemic problem is also manifesting itself south of the border: “One of the most visible symptoms of a crisis in public education is the nationwide underfunding and elimination of music programs” (Morefield, 2006, p. 01). And ultimately, it is the students and society at large that pay the price.

### **As a Performer: Inequality of Access to Live Music**

As a professional performer, I have from time-to-time taken leaves of absence from my work to perform in a number of different musical acts. I remember working with one particular artist who had booked a number of performances at various elementary and high schools across the country. This experience produced a number of rich and productive conversations with teachers, administrators, and students on the state of music education in specific schools and regions across Canada. Despite some good news stories, the vast majority of these conversations addressed the inherent trials and tribulations of music education -- stories that I have heard a million times before.

What I did discover, however, was that students had an undeniable thirst and appetite for live music; something I could not detect as readily as a parent, teacher, and teacher educator. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that this phenomenon was an equity issue within music education, and perhaps had something to do with the marginalization of music programs in many of our schools. It was not long ago, for instance, that all musical experiences were heard in a live setting, as recorded music was simply not possible. Today, however, almost all music is experienced through a multitude of ubiquitous digital sounds via cell phones, computers, internet applications, vehicles, television, radio, shopping malls, and even elevators. In fact, students have almost become anesthetized to (Attali, 1985) and unaware of all the music in their lives. In other words, live music and the demand for it is basically non-existent in the daily lives of youth because of such ubiquitous and constant access to recorded music.

The lack of exposure to live music takes one of the most critical components of music education -- the act of making and performing music -- out of the lives of our youth. If students do not see and hear live music-making on a regular basis, then there is little need, desire, or inspiration to do it themselves. Children need exposure to live musical experiences, as even the best recording equipment cannot replace the authentic energy and feel of live music. Perhaps ironically, while there is equality of access to recorded music, there is a massive inequality of access to live music. Our musical listening experiences, therefore, are out of balance and heavily skewed.

### **Conclusion**

*Some of us will do our jobs well and some will not,  
but we will be judged by only one thing -- the result.*

*Vince Lombardi*

As a music education professional, I will be the first to admit that it is very easy to point my finger and say he, she, this, or that caused music education to dwell on the fringes of academia in our public schools. I don't think, though, that music educators should be exempt from some of the responsibility—and I include myself in this. The most culpable area, in my opinion, has been the failure of music teachers to assume positions of leadership within schools and school boards where decision-making on policies, curriculum, and budgets are made. I suspect there are two main reasons why this is the case: music educators see administration as a dull, tedious, and un-creative career path, the very opposite of what attracts them to working in a musical setting. The second reason deals with the perception of music education. Many school board officials, in my opinion, do not consider music an academic discipline, but rather a frill. I truly believe music would not be marginalized in so many schools if it were considered an academic subject. As the keepers of the musical flame, music teachers, therefore, unfairly get branded as too artsy and liberated to enter into school administration. In over 14 years of public education experience, I have only come across one music teacher that has gone on to administration. I know there are more out there, but I would be willing to wager that music education professionals constitute a very small percentage of school administrators.

Music teachers must also work on reproducing their own musical experiences to ensure that only very traditional approaches to curriculum are no longer the norm in the majority of music classrooms. The disconnect between lived experience and current educational approaches is, I think, in part due to the mass culture of music publishers who produce thousands of method and technique books, rhythm studies, and band/orchestral/vocal music that address the same curriculum I was exposed to as a high school student in the 1980s—and believe me, a lot has changed since then. What worked in the past doesn't necessarily work in the present. The musical experiences of our students (what they listen to and how they listen to it) are vastly different than just a couple of decades ago, and music teachers need to welcome and embrace such new experiences in their pedagogy and curriculum.

Advocating for quality music education in all of our publicly funded schools is an important issue within education today for all of us with a vested interest in quality, well-rounded and inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, children have a legal, moral, and ethical right to receive it. I will end this article with the same question that I started with: What would life on this planet be like without music? I think the answer can be found in the philosophy of Nietzsche (as cited in Jaspers, Wallraff, & Schmitz, 1997): "Without music, life would be a mistake, a hardship, an exile."

*One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain.*

*Bob Marley*

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