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Ellary A. Draper
University of Alabama

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Ellary A. Draper

University of Alabama

Critical Pedagogy and Disability: Considerations for Music Education

ABSTRACT

Developed by Brazilian Paulo Freire to teach economically disadvantaged adults to read, critical pedagogy has since inspired others to adapt the model to other subject areas. In the area of music education, Frank Abrahams created the Critical Pedagogy for Music Education (CPME) model and has written about the use of CPME in teacher preparation programs. Scholars in disability studies have also been inspired by critical pedagogy, writing about disability pedagogy. Notably, people with disabilities have historically been omitted from models of critical pedagogy. This article discusses the intersections of critical pedagogy, music education, and disability, and makes recommendations to music education scholars on including students with disabilities in future models.

Keywords

critical pedagogy; Frank Abrahams; music education; disability; inclusion

Critical pedagogy is a model of education that was originally developed by Brazilian Paulo Freire to teach economically disadvantaged adults to read (Abrahams, 2005a). Since Freire originally wrote about his model, educators in areas outside of reading have written about critical pedagogy extensively and made applications to their own areas of study across different levels of students (e.g., Stovall, 2006), including music education (e.g., Abrahams, 2005a) and in disability studies (e.g., Erevelles, 2000); however, none to date have examined the intersection of critical pedagogy, disability, and music education. Given that nearly all music teachers teach in inclusive music classrooms and work with students with disabilities (VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014), examining this intersection is important to ensure that we are creating music programs that serve *all* students.

HISTORY OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Freire originally wrote about critical pedagogy in his pivotal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1971), as well as in additional texts including: *The politics of education: Culture, power, and liberation* (1985), *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage* (1998), and *Pedagogy of the heart* (2000), among others. He is well known for his critique of the “banking model” of education, where students are viewed as empty vessels to be filled by teachers’ knowledge (Freire, 1971).

Instead, Freire proposed a model in which students and teachers engaged in conversational exchanges of information (Abrahams, 2005b). In this model teachers pose questions and problems, allowing students “to take what they already knew and understood from their world outside the classroom and connect it to their literacy goals, namely reading and writing” (Abrahams, 2005b, p. 62). Through this dialogue and reflection, teachers and students together are transformed, and ultimately arrive at “conscientization”—or students’ and teachers’ ‘knowing that they know’ (Abrahams, 2005b).

Freire also wrote extensively about learners and teachers existing within a cultural context, and therefore, they must learn to reflect upon their own situation. Education is political—what knowledge is passed down from teacher to student, generation by generation—has implications (Abrahams, 2005a). One implication is that there is the possibility to perpetuate a society that is not open to growth and change; Freire suggested students’ and teachers’ reflections of their cultural contexts can guard against this (Abrahams, 2005a).

There have been critiques of Freire and critical pedagogy raised to the model and pedagogy as a whole, including Bowers (1987), Ellsworth (1989), Liston (1988), Strike (1989), Knight and Pearl (2000), and more recently Breuing (2011), Foley et al. (2015), and Neumann (2013). Some argued that Freire abandoned early theories that served as the basis for critical pedagogy, while others argued that critical pedagogy can worsen the very power structures they are trying to work against. Hess (2017, 2019) argued that critical pedagogy may exacerbate the hierarchy between teachers and students, colonial relations, and gendered and raced power structures. After examining these problems in the book, *Music Education for Social Change*, Hess (2019) set forth a “possible practical enactment of critical pedagogy for music education” (p. 150).

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND MUSIC EDUCATION

In the early to mid-2000s music educator scholars began exploring how music educators could engage with critical pedagogy in their classrooms, the most notable being Frank Abrahams (2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007a, 2007b, 2017). In his 2005 article, Abrahams presented “Five Key Principles of Critical Pedagogy” along with an eight-step learning sequence model for applying critical pedagogy in music classrooms:

1. Education is a conversation where students and their teachers pose and solve problems together.
2. Education broadens the students' view of reality. The goal of teaching and learning is to bring about a change in the way that both students and teachers perceive the world.
3. Education is empowering. When students and teachers realize they know something with a depth that goes beyond the recall of information, this is "conscientization." This knowledge includes a new understanding and an ability to act on this knowledge in such a way as to effect a change.
4. Education is transformative. A lesson has been learned when both the teachers and students can acknowledge a change in their own perceptions. It is this change or transformation that teachers can assess.
5. Education is political. There are issues of power and control inside the classroom, the school building, and the community. Those in power make decisions about what is taught, how often classes meet, how much money is allocated to each school subject or program, and so forth. Those who use the critical-pedagogy model are able to transcend these constraints by focusing on the valuable knowledge students bring to the classroom. (p. 66)

Abrahams's eight-step learning sequence puts these five assertions into practice (see Table 1).

Abrahams (2007b) also wrote about using the Critical Pedagogy for Music Education (CPME) model to teach pre-service music education majors in their methods courses. He outlined a course sequence where students learn about various learning theories, including those that are the basis for CPME, before being introduced to the CPME learning sequence as a basis to write lesson plans. Students then learn how to apply the principles of CPME in various field experiences prior to their student teaching.

Recently, Abrahams (2017) has written about applications of critical pedagogy in rehearsal settings and presented rehearsal strategies that are consistent with the principles of critical pedagogy. These strategies include *Circle all around*; *That's me*; *Catch me being good*; *So you think you can sing*; and *Reciprocal teaching*. In circle all around, the chairs in each section are in concentric circles facing each other to form partners. The partners then work to examine the score and identify challenges that may arise during the rehearsal, and brainstorm possible solutions together. The students then share their ideas with the class, and they check their predictions with what happens during the rehearsal. For *That's me*, students stand to sing when they are singing a musical theme. This allows students to engage in critical listening and to see how the theme moves from one part to another.

Table 1*Abrahams' Eight-Step Lesson Plan.*

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY answers these objectives:	WAYS TO EMPOWER MUSICIANS	LESSON STEPS	NATIONAL STANDARDS	LESSON FORM
Who we are	Engage musical imagination	1. Honoring their world: Students select favorite Madonna tune to play in class. Teacher focuses listening by suggesting students map significant parts in the music as it plays.	Experiencing music (National Standards 6 and 7)	Exposition
		2. Sharing the experience: Students and teacher dialogue about Madonna's music making, musicianship and impact on culture. Students are asked how they might present Madonna's music to a classroom in a non-Western country.		
Who students may become	Engage musical intelligence	3. Connecting their world to the classroom: After listening to or viewing Mozart's "Queen of the Night" aria many times, students create skits to audition or interview Madonna for the part of the Queen of the Night.	Connecting music (National Standards 8 and 9)	Development
		4. Dialoguing together: Students and teacher discuss Mozart. They discuss his life, his music, music making, and why Mozart's an important icon in Western musical tradition.		
		5. Practicing the concept: Students create a chart comparing and analyzing Mozart and Madonna as musicians, performers, composers, and influential cultural icons.		
Who we might become together	Engage musical creativity	6. Connecting school music to students' world: Individually, in small groups, or as a class, students re-compose "Queen of the Night" aria for Madonna. They change melody, texture, and style as they deem appropriate.	Creating music (National Standards 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7)	Improvisation
		7. Assessing transformation: New arias performed. Students and teacher reflect and evaluate work completed. An assessment rubric may be applied at this step.		
	Engage musical celebration through performance	8. Acknowledging transformation: Students present their arias in performance or attend a performance of <i>The Magic Flute</i> .	Performing music (National Standards 1 and 2)	Recapitulation

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Catch me being good and *So you think you can sing* can be used in tandem. In *Catch me being good*, the conductor walks through the choir and finds the "best" singer in each section. They then work with the conductor in *So you think you can sing*, to listen to either the entire choir or a section to provide both positive and negative criticism to the singers; they must include a possible solution to any negative criticism. In *Reciprocal teaching*, the teacher and students together engage in predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing—the teacher and students taking part in each strategy to engage in decision making and find meaning during the rehearsal.

Such strategies engage learners to be active in the learning process and align with critical pedagogy in that students are posed with a problem and then are asked to solve that problem. They also provide opportunities for students to try out their ideas in real time and see how their ideas can be applied and if they are successful in solving the problem at hand. This allows students to construct new knowledge, feel empowered as musicians, and participate in class discussions that include the cultural context of the repertoire.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND DISABILITY

As mentioned above, Freire originally conceived of critical pedagogy when working with economically disadvantaged adults learning to read in Brazil (Abrahams, 2005a). Since then, other scholars writing in the field of critical pedagogy have been concerned with those who have traditionally been marginalized, particularly in schools. However, many scholars have not included people with disabilities when writing about marginalized populations, even when writing about race, class, gender, and sexuality (e.g., Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Emdin, 2016; Giroux, 1992; McLaren, 1988; Souto-Manning, 2010). Scholars within disability studies have long argued that disability is a social construct, “a representation, a cultural comparison of bodies that structure [unequal] social relations and institutions” (Garland Thomas, 1997, p. 6) and have criticized those who have omitted disability when writing about marginalized populations (e.g., Bell & Rathgeber, 2020; Erevelles, 2000).

Disability pedagogy—a subset of the larger field of disability studies—has its roots in social justice politics and was influenced by critical pedagogy (Nocella, 2008). Scholars within the field of disability pedagogy, especially those who are disabled themselves bring new ideas and considerations to existing models and theories. Disability pedagogy, then, “is not only about the process of teaching, but more so it is about critiquing social, economic, and political structures that have constructed the concept of normal, average, equal, and standard” (Nocella, 2008, p. 89).

Disability pedagogy pairs itself quite well with critical pedagogy. The Centers for Disease Control (2020) estimated that approximately 26% (over 61 million) adults live with disabilities in the United States; the World Health Organization (2021) estimate that over one billion people live with some form of disability. People with disabilities in the U.S. face a number of issues including access to health care, increased probability of being the victim of a crime, and lack of representation in the media amongst other concerns (Draper, 2021). As Andersen (2006) argued:

Disability is not just another specialty with concerns loosely related to other minorities. The experience of disability is relevant to all marginalized groups—for all groups have people with disabilities in them. The persistent irony is that the experience of people with disabilities have been noticeably absent from critical discourse *within* these groups (p. 367).

The U.S. Department of Education (2022) reported that over six million students with disabilities ages six through twenty-one received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2019 (IDEA). IDEA also requires students with disabilities to be educated alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible (IDEA, 2004). Of those students, over 80% spend 40% or more of their school day in inclusive classrooms. It is likely that many teachers, including many music teachers, work with students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

Scholars within disability pedagogy have written about inclusion (e.g., Artiles & Kozleski, 2016). Gabel (2002) wrote:

Inclusivity requires a commitment of resources of time, money, energy, and supplies: time and energy to alter the ways pedagogy is conceptualized; imagination to create applications of liberatory pedagogies to ability-inclusive educational and community contexts; commitment to a pedagogy that includes students who may wear diapers, who drool, who may be uninhibited, or who will never read and write but who can think and learn. It requires a fundamental shift in the way we plan and enact teacher education, particularly in the ways we prepare teachers to understand, come to know, and teach “all” students. (p. 188)

IDEA was originally passed as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975 (Jellison 2015). The idea of students being educated in regular classrooms is not new, yet disability remains absent from many discussions in pedagogy; and it is important that those involved in teacher education consider how to best prepare pre-service teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Results of surveys of music teachers indicate that nearly all music teachers teach in inclusive music classrooms and have students with disabilities (Hicken et al., 2018; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014), yet there is a paucity of research that has been conducted in inclusive music settings (Jellison & Draper, 2014). Additionally, while discussions within the field of music education have begun to happen on how we can better serve students from marginalized populations (e.g., webinars, special issue journals, conference presentations)—like the field of critical pedagogy, music education and related areas have not included students with disabilities as part of these discussions.

One possible explanation for the lack of research in inclusive classrooms is that researchers simply are not reporting students with disabilities in existing research studies as participants and are failing to label their classrooms as inclusive. Similarly, I would theorize that music education scholars who have written about critical pedagogy have used original sources in the development of their models, original sources which did not include people with disabilities, and therefore have created models that also do not include people with disabilities.

Moving forward in the field of music education, and particularly in the field of critical pedagogy in music education, it is important that scholars and teachers continue to build on the foundations of those who have done so much service to the field, like Frank Abrahams, continuing to expand upon their original ideas. These discussions are important for music educators who are actively teaching, as well as for educators working with pre-service music teachers. Abrahams developed CPME to ensure that students have access to a complete, relevant, music education that transforms them as learners—we must continue to ensure that this includes *all* students.

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About the Author

Ellary Draper is Associate Professor of Music Therapy at The University of Alabama. She holds degrees in music education from Westminster Choir College, music therapy from Florida State University, and music and human learning from The University of Texas at Austin.

Prior to attending The University of Texas, Dr. Draper worked as a music therapist with a variety of ages and populations. She also has experience as an elementary general music teacher. Dr. Draper's research interests are in the areas of children with disabilities, particularly in inclusive music classrooms.

Currently, she serves as the Chair of the Board of Directors for the Certification Board for Music Therapists and as the Chair of Special Education for the Alabama Music Educators Association. A regular presenter at national and regional music therapy and music education conferences, her research is also published in the *Journal of Music Therapy*, *Journal of Research in Music Education*, *Music Educators Journal*, *UPDATE: Applications of Research in Music Education*, *General Music Today*, *imagine*, and *Ala Breve*.