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Isabella Harkopf

Boston University, isabellaharkopf@gmail.com

Kelly Bylica

Boston University, kbylica@bu.edu

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Isabella Harkopf

Boston University

Kelly Bylica

Boston University

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ABSTRACT

Music education scholarship has long called for a more critical, socially just approach to teacher preparation. These include curricular opportunities to work with students from diverse contexts in practicum settings, social-justice-oriented readings and professional development, and guided reflection opportunities. However, scholars also note that practicing educators often revert to “traditional” methods of teaching once they enter the field, suggesting a disconnect between music teacher education and practice. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the experiences of three recent alumni of one music teacher education program, paying particular attention to the ways in which these teachers engage or do not engage in socially just practices in their music classrooms. In particular, we focused on how their experiences as music education students impacted their practices as they relate to social justice. We also examined possible barriers that may make socially just engagements challenging. Findings suggest that engaging in both theoretical and contextually applied approaches to critical pedagogy is particularly important. Findings also suggest that practicing educators may face challenges including navigating accountability measures and finding a balance between meeting the needs of students in the classroom while simultaneously challenging oppressive structures. This project has the potential to inform how we can best incorporate a more inclusive and critical pedagogy in ways that are practical for teachers as they

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enter their first year of teaching and may also result in resources to support critical pedagogy and social justice in music classrooms.

Keywords

critical pedagogy, Freire, hooks, preservice music education, social justice

INTRODUCTION

Music education scholars have long examined how and in what ways preservice music educators are prepared to practice critical, socially just approaches in their classrooms (Ballantyne et al., 2016; Ballantyne & Mills, 2008; Benedict et al., 2015; Salvador & Kelly-McHale, 2017). Within music education, these preparations may include opportunities to work with students in diverse music-based practicum settings, social-justice-oriented readings, professional development, and guided reflection opportunities (Ballantyne et al., 2016; Ballantyne & Mills, 2008; Robinson, 2017). However, scholars also note that practicing music educators often revert to “traditional” methods of teaching once they enter the field or may be uncertain as to how (or whether) to integrate socially just practices in the classroom (Ballantyne & Mills, 2008; Conway & Hodgman, 2020; Salvador & Kelly-McHale, 2017). This suggests a disconnect between teacher preparation programs and contextualized realities of classroom-based music teaching.

In this article, we offer an analysis of three in-service music educators’ conceptions of socially just music education practices. At the time of the study, each participant was a recent graduate of the same preservice teacher education program, referred to in this article as *University A*.¹ As part of their preservice coursework, participants took classes whose titles and syllabi included a focus on “social justice” or a derivative of this phrase. Within these courses, faculty invited student experiences and personal narratives into the classroom, offered structured opportunities for students to critically respond to and reflect on educational and musical norms, and encouraged students to regularly engage in readings and professional development opportunities specifically directed toward socially just practices. Through interviews, participants reflected on their experiences in the preservice program and highlight connections and disconnections between their preservice experience and their lived reality as practicing music educators.

We begin by framing our conception and understanding of the term “social justice” with the work of Freire (1970) and hooks (1994). We then further ground this study in the literature surrounding preservice music education and social justice. Findings from this study indicate that participants often associated socially just practices with the prioritization of opportunities for multiple ways knowing, experiencing, and being musical in their classrooms. However, participants often found that they faced challenges when trying to navigate socially just practices on a school-wide level. Finally, participants shared a belief that being a critical and/or socially just educator was a fluid process in which one was always learning and growing.

Social Justice and Critical Pedagogy

Social justice is often employed in the literature as a “catch-all expression” when seeking to address social issues related to marginalization (Benedict et al., 2015, p. xi). Although some have defined social justice as a passive recognition of what and who is deemed “other” (e.g., Hanley et al., 2013), most scholars take an active stance toward social justice. Cochran-Smith and colleagues (2009), for example, noted that social justice involves the deliberate removal of barriers that “constrain individuals’ or groups’ life choices” (p. 375). Similarly, Benedict and colleagues (2015) argued that in music education, the pursuit of social justice “implies more than the recognition of difference and allowing for greater diversity and inclusivity in the classroom and other educational spaces” (p. xi). For the purposes of this article, we align with Bell (1997) in framing social justice as “both a process and a goal” with the ultimate aim of “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (p. 3). Within music education, this may involve the development of critical, democratically-oriented educational spaces where students are encouraged to take an active role in creating a more just world (Hackman, 2005) and the development of opportunities for students to imagine and artistically actualize socially just practices through dialogue and musical interaction (Bylica, 2022).

Social justice-oriented education is also impacted by educational censorship bills that discriminate against certain marginalized groups and restrict conversations and representation in classroom settings (Salvador et al., 2023). In today’s society, the proliferation of legislation prohibiting discussion related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and race (see Pen America, 2022; Salvador et al., 2023), as well as increased harassment toward marginalized populations (Del Toro & Wang, 2022) has brought debate about social justice in education to the forefront. Scholars argue that such legislation has had—and will continue to have—a devastating effect on young people (Pen America, 2022; Salvador et al., 2023). Despite this, backlash toward social justice language also exists, as such practices can be seen as superfluous or ideologically weighted (Michelli et al., 2005).

For the purposes of this study, we drew primarily upon the work of Freire (1970) and hooks (1994) to provide a framework for our understanding of social justice and education. Within Freirean pedagogy, we focused specifically on the concepts of banking education, problem-posing, and praxis. Freire (1970) challenged the uni-directional “banking” approach to teaching in which students are seen as living and learning in a pre-existing world where knowledge is deposited by the educator into the minds of the students. Within the banking approach, knowledge is often disconnected from context and students are perceived as having little of value to contribute to the production of it. Freire (1970) offered instead a multi-directional problem-posing model. Central to problem-posing is the development of critical literacy through *reading the world*, that is to draw upon personal experiences as one develops the tools to understand, critique, and problematize larger social structures (Freire, 1987). Problem-posing, according to Freire (1970), is grounded in praxis. Praxis involves both critical reflection *and* action. Within

this approach to education, students exist with the world, inventing and reinventing knowledge through engagement with it. The world is not a static reality to be learned about and processed, but it is always in flux and, therefore, able to be negotiated, impacted, and potentially transformed through action. From a practical standpoint, a Freirean approach to education may include deliberate opportunities for both students and teachers to practice critical reflection, the development and enactment of curricula that is flexible and responsive, and educational opportunities that deliberately connect to and comment upon students' worlds both within and beyond the classroom setting.

Freire's contributions to critical pedagogies and social justice practices have their critiques (Darder et al., 2003; Ellsworth, 1989; Pinar, 2009). Scholars have argued that Freirean pedagogy is elitist and superficial, ignoring arguments of intersectionality and minimizing the experiences of "those groups that had existed historically at the margins of mainstream life" (Darder et al., 2003, p. 17). As we analyzed the data, we kept these critiques in mind, and we attempted to use our conversations with one another and with critical friends (Creswell, 2013) who offered additional perspectives and helped us to reflect on the ways in which we might be falsely imposing a singular narrative of social justice.

We also drew from the work of hooks (1994) for our framework, specifically the key tenets central to engaged pedagogy, an approach to education built upon transgression, critical thought, and hope. Engaged pedagogy is firmly grounded in theory which, hooks argued, is central to social justice practice. Offering a critical interrogation and extension of Freire's ideas, hooks believed in a need to develop curricular and relational approaches through the use of diverse texts, humor, collaboration, and opportunities for conflict. Communally, educators and students not only recognize, but grapple with multiple ways of knowing, being, and understanding as influential and consequential to the learning environment of the classroom. Practically, this might mean that the diverse experiences of students and educators drive the content and engagement in educational spaces. Furthermore, for hooks, "hope" is not only about naming inequities, but about working toward constructive pathways that move beyond cynicism and toward optimistic, actionable change. Theorizing is then used to "make sense out of what [is] happening... [and to] imagine possible futures" (hooks, 1994, p. 61). To "do" engaged pedagogy in the classroom, hooks noted the need for flexibility and "spontaneous shifts in direction" as knowledge is gathered "fully and inclusively" (p. 91). This then creates space in which to "move beyond accepted boundaries," confront differences, and engage in social action (p. 7).

Socially Just Approaches to Preservice Music Education

Much of the narrative on preservice music education and social justice is theoretically-based, though empirical studies examining connections between this topic and context do exist. Ballantyne and Mills (2015) completed a comprehensive literature review examining the empirical work in the field and found that the majority of studies focus on

preservice music educators' beliefs about socially just practices in music education (Ballantyne & Mills, 2008; Joseph & Southcott, 2010; Power & Horsley, 2010; Riley, 2009). In general, findings from each study indicated that preservice music educators held a positive orientation toward socially just practices, though some had a narrow conception of social justice (Ballantyne & Mills, 2008).

Though the participants in our study did not specifically partake in immersion experiences, much of the literature on social justice oriented music teacher education is related to such experiences (Emmanuel, 2005; Marsh, 2007; VanDeusen, 2019). In some cases, immersion experiences centered on intercultural experiences and the importance of drawing attention to one's cultural status in a given context. Focusing on the role of exploring unfamiliar cultures in Australia, Marsh (2007) invited students to participate in an inquiry-based fieldwork project. Within this project, preservice music educators engaged in cultural immersion to better understand the people making music in order to mitigate cultural barriers that may exist between insider and outsider perspectives. Both Emmanuel (2005) and VanDeusen (2019) examined immersion-based experiences in culturally diverse communities in the United States. In Emmanuel's (2005) study, preservice music educators engaged in observation and team-teaching in multiple school sites in Detroit, Michigan. Emmanuel (2005) found that preservice teacher perspectives shifted dramatically as a result of this study, with participants becoming more socially aware to the extent that they felt called to social action. VanDeusen (2019) completed a similar study with preservice music educators, focusing on cultural immersion in a predominantly Arab and Muslim community. In each of these examples, however, data collection stopped following the immersion experience. Data exploring the long-term impact of such experiences were not shared.

Scholars have argued that coursework addressing socially just practices needs to be directly tied to music classroom contexts for preservice teachers to see relevance (Ballantyne & Mills, 2008; Joseph & Southcott, 2010). Furthermore, Kelly (2003) and Power and Horsley (2010) suggested that standalone diversity courses are not often successful at changing long-held beliefs. Robinson (2017), however, found that a three-part diversity series designed specifically to help preservice teachers develop a critical consciousness for diversity and equity can have a positive impact. Robinson (2017) argued that such programs are only a starting point for developing socially just practices, suggesting the need for diversity training throughout and beyond the preservice experience.

Others have considered the perspectives of music teacher educators on social justice, noting that these perspectives likely shape how social justice is approached in preservice programs. Salvador and Kelly-McHale (2017) examined the perspectives of 361 music teacher educators as they related to social justice and addressing socially just practices in music education. They found that participants held conflicting views of social justice as well as the need for discussions and actions surrounding this topic in preservice music programs. Although many participants offered examples of how they

may embed socially just practices and discussions in their classes, the majority of respondents indicated a desire for more information and resources related to the topic. Conway and Hodgman (2020) considered student perspectives on school spaces, focusing on how these spaces do or do not support allyhood. Defining allyhood as the understanding of injustice in relation to music, the researchers found that university music programs often fall short in supporting allyhood amongst students. Rather, participants noted that, despite efforts to embrace socially just practices in some classes, a “survival of the fittest” atmosphere predicated on meritocracy often defined their experience. Information gleaned from these studies suggests that university music education programs still have a long way to go to promote socially just practices in the field.

Joseph and Southcott (2009, 2010) argued that, although preservice music education programs are important in helping to support dispositions toward social justice, professional development that helps music educators reflect upon and continue to build these dispositions is equally important. This is due, in part, to the contextual challenges educators face when seeking to implement socially just practices beyond university settings (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Monchinski, 2008; Neumann, 2013). Although examples of teachers embracing socially just music practices in school settings do exist (e.g., Bylica, 2022; Lewis & Christopherson, 2021), the majority of literature on the topic indicates broad changes that do not often consider the distinct nature of local contexts (Neumann, 2013). As such, exploring the challenges and successes of music educators who experienced a social justice oriented preservice program after they have begun teaching offers a perspective that may further inform the field.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of three recent alumni of one music teacher education program, paying attention to the ways in which these teachers engage or do not engage in socially just practices in their music classrooms. In particular, we focused on how participants’ experiences as music education students including coursework, relationships with peers and faculty, ensemble experiences, and involvement in music education-based clubs and programs impacted their practices as they relate to social justice. We also examined possible barriers that may make socially just engagements challenging. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What practices and opportunities, if any, from their preservice experience did participants feel impacted their experiences with social justice pedagogies?
- 2) In what ways, if any, have these participants seen a shift in their practices and beliefs from their preservice experiences as they relate to social justice pedagogy?
- 3) What barriers, if any, did these three teachers encounter when transitioning from preservice to active teaching that have impacted socially just engagements in their classroom?

METHOD

We employed a collective case study design for the purpose of this inquiry. Stake (2010) indicated that the purpose of a collective case study is to “investigate a phenomenon,

population, or general condition” (p. 437). In this study, the population explored was students who had graduated from a critically-oriented music education program. We limited participants to three cases to provide a rich, in-depth data set (Creswell, 2013). The participants’ experiences were contextually bound, giving us the opportunity to generate a holistic portrait of each participant, followed by a cross-case analysis in order to identify similarities and distinctions amongst the cases.

Participants

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) was used to select novice music educators who were recent graduates of the same preservice music education program. For the purpose of this study, educators with less than 5 years of in-service teaching experience were defined as *novice*. We began by compiling a list of all recent (< 5 years) graduates of University A who were now teaching PK-12 music. We then sought out publicly-available contact information for the teachers on this list, acquiring information for five novice teachers. All five were invited to participation in the study. Three teachers agreed to participate: Emily, Thomas, and James. Study procedures were cleared through our university’s institutional review board and written consent was provided by each participant.

Participant Profiles

Emily graduated from University A in the Spring of 2019. At the time of the study, she was teaching grades 5-8 at Boulevard Middle School. She grew up adamantly believing that she did not want to become a teacher, but she realized in high school that she “loved engaging with people on a musical level” and thus decided to pursue music education as a career path. She chose Boulevard Middle School because she felt that administrators had a hands-off approach and allowed her to create a curriculum of her own rather than following an existing curriculum. Boulevard Middle School serves 720 students in grades 5–8, 84% of whom come from low-income households (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2021).

Thomas graduated from University A in the Spring of 2019. At the time of the study, he was teaching high school and one 7th-grade class at Innovation School of Math & Science. Thomas realized late in high school that he wanted to become a music educator and applied to schools with that intent. Thomas reflected on his education at University A very positively and found his first job based on connections he made at University A. Innovation School offers a science, technology, engineering, and math program integrated with humanities. It serves 1,500 students in grades 7-12, 62% of whom come from low-income households (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2021).

James graduated from University A in the Spring of 2018. At the time of the study, he was a K–5 General Music Teacher at East Coast Elementary. Unlike Emily and Thomas, he did not attend University A with the intention of becoming an in-school music educator. His initial goal was to work in community-based education.

However, after his first semester at University A, he transferred into the licensure program because of his experience in his first education course. East Coast Elementary serves 700 students, almost 90% of whom come from low-income households (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2021).

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of two semistructured interviews with each participant, each of which lasted 50–70 minutes, as well as researcher notes. We utilized a semistructured approach to interviews (Seidman, 2006) to encourage the participants to speak openly about their experiences. Data collection occurred over 2 months, with interviews spaced approximately one month apart. Given that data collection occurred in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews occurred over Zoom. In the first interview, participants were invited to share their teaching experience, their perceptions of and connections to the community in which they teach, and the impact their preservice experiences had on their own teaching. In particular, we utilized questions that asked participants to focus on their conceptions of critical pedagogical practices and critical teacher identity in order to explore perceived connections and disconnections between classroom practice and preservice education (Ballantyne & Mills, 2008; Neumann, 2013). In the second interview, we focused on practical participant experiences in the classroom. Drawing from the literature that suggests that teachers may face challenges implementing critical practices in the classroom (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Neumann, 2013), questions focused on barriers participants face, as well as resources and support systems that participants draw upon when enacting critical practices in the classroom. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and email follow-up questions that emerged from data collection points were sent to each participant for clarification. Following each interview, we, as researchers, met to discuss key themes, issues, and questions that arose. We audio-recorded and transcribed these conversations, utilizing them as a form of memoing (Patton, 2015) that was then also drawn upon as a source of data.

Data Analysis

Together we read and analyzed the data from all of the participants as well as from our own notes using a cross-case analysis (Miles et al., 2018). Data analysis involved a two-step coding process. In step 1, we engaged in open, descriptive coding, which allowed us to assign labels based on passages of qualitative data (Miles et al., 2018). We then utilized axial coding (Saldaña, 2015) to group like codes and establish large themes. Throughout the process, we returned to the literature, particularly the work of Freire (1970) and hooks (1994), to help us conceptualize the data in relation to the research questions. Trustworthiness was sought through member checks, triangulation of data, and shared thinking with critical friends (Creswell, 2013).

FINDINGS

Prioritizing Possibility over Predetermination

Participants all cited the importance of challenging predetermined expectations about music education. They each noted that, in order to enact engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994), it was important to focus on the needs of the students. They articulated that being responsive and adaptive to these needs required music education practices that “pushed boundaries” (Emily).

James, for example, shared that he almost abandoned hope of a career in music education, because he did not feel as though he “belonged in a traditional program.” He shared that he was “not interested in perpetuating typical conductor-student music education.” He noted that a flexible approach to music education was modeled in his preservice preparation program: “[University A] was about seeing that traditional models are not the only way, and, in fact, they are problematic in many ways and it’s cool to be innovative.” For James, socially just practices were made evident through courses that encouraged preservice teachers to question norms and imagine new possibilities for music education classes, including electives that focused on intersections of power and privilege in the classroom, as well as methods courses that invited students to imagine music education classrooms based in dialogue, composition, and collaborative learning. James sought to bring these ideas into his own classroom, deliberately engaging in flexible and responsive planning that was grounded in practices of questioning.

Emily, however, noted that the perspectives of the music education program at University A were often contradicted by other departments such as performance and theory: “Music, especially at [University A], is always right or wrong when you’re coming from the performance department...but the music that I teach with my kids, there is no right or wrong and there is no good or bad.” She went on to note that she struggled with this chasm between performance and education, explaining that music education students were often expected to participate in ensembles that lacked the same flexible approaches to music making she was learning about in her education classes. She sought to challenge the ensemble-based paradigm at University A, noting a desire for the university to expand its offerings in order to give students opportunities to participate in a multitude of for-credit ensembles, some of which might operate outside of “traditional” norms.

Both James’s and Emily’s comments could be considered commentaries on the challenges of institutional change. Scholars have noted that, as institutions, universities tend to be resistant to change, operating as static institutions who often reinforce norms and consistency, promoting particular perceptions of the kinds of knowledge that “counts” in these spaces (Osei-Kofi et al., 2010). Aligning with the findings of Conway and Hodgman (2020), socially just practices may be centered in particular courses and may even define the practices of a department, but often these courses and departments still operate within a college or institution defined by meritocracy and predetermination.

Thus, while there may be moments for transformation to emerge within university music education programs, such change becomes context-specific when, as Freire (1970) notes, individuals are valued for their accomplishments rather than their humanity.

Discussions and underlying philosophies from University A music education coursework also carried over into participants' daily work. This was referenced in relation to prioritizing context, relationships, and representation. According to participants, each of these priorities were key tenets of University A's educational philosophy in music education. James noted that the methods courses contained "equally, an element of problematizing things [and] discussions of applying it in a like real-world sense... how can you adapt this for this situation or how could you change things." Every participant discussed how relationship building was emphasized during their music education coursework at University A and was now a central part of their classroom. Emily pointed out that relationship building was not about "icebreakers," but rather was about "creating relationships that are more than just 'what's your favorite color?'" In such moments, Emily noted that she was seeking to support caring and collaborative spaces, similar to those prioritized in hooks' (1994) conception of engaged pedagogy as students and teachers grapple with multiple ways of being in the world. Relationship building was embedded into projects and musical activities, and Emily noted that she often made these experiences ungraded to help students feel more comfortable sharing.

Representation was also important to Emily. She referenced paying considerable attention to the music she brought into the class, noting, "I spend a lot of time thinking in terms of what is the music we're listening to, what is the impact of that music, what is the history of that music, whose voices are being heard, whose voices are being silenced, as well as what are the kids doing with that knowledge." Dialogue was central to relationship building and representation for Thomas, who stated: "I can't just tell the students what my beliefs are and what I think is right, that's actually not going to help us, you know, be a better socially just society." For all three participants, understanding context, building relationships, and working to ensure representation were key elements of socially just teaching.

The Challenging Reality of Doing the Work

All three participants commented on a variety of challenges that prevented them from being able to fully enact critical, socially just practices in their teaching. Lack of follow-through, challenging relationships with administrators, and pre-existing societal structures such as grades and standardization were all cited as barriers that made enacting socially just music education difficult. Participants also noted that these challenges were exacerbated by the learning curve of being a new teacher. These barriers made reforms challenging, thus potentially thwarting the action-oriented calls for change from Freire (1970) and hooks (1994).

One of the challenges participants faced was a lack of follow-through on school-wide initiatives to promote socially just teaching or administrators who restricted the content that could be taught in their music programs. Emily commented that at her

school, “we have these meetings where we’re like ‘we should do this,’ and we talk all about it and then no one ever does anything on a school-wide sort of basis.” However, because her administrators have a more hands-off approach to her instruction, Emily said, “I’ve taken it upon myself to do the individual things within my own classroom because of the allotted freedoms that I have.” Emily noted that the administrators’ approach at her school gave her the space and autonomy that she needed to enact socially just practices in her classroom.

James felt less prepared to enact critical practices with an administration that did not actively prioritize initiatives to promote equity and justice. At the first school he taught at, James’ administration had a more restrictive approach to what was being taught in the music room. He shared one particular experience in which he asked an administrator if he could teach hip-hop and was told “no” because “there are either themes or words that can trigger students.” Unlike Emily, he was unsure how to continue this dialogue with administrators, noting that he often felt “shut down” as a new teacher. At his current school, James has faced a different challenge. He shared: “On paper, everyone [at my current school] is definitely on board with this sort of work. But when it comes to actually changing curriculum and instruction, that’s a whole other can of worms.” James felt unsure of how to garner support for school-wide actionable change, stating that he often felt the changes he was able to enact were limited to his own classroom. Both Emily and James felt that actionable change was far easier to enact on a classroom level than throughout the school as a whole. However, despite occurring solely on a micro level, it is possible that Emily’s and James’s actions here could be seen as small acts of subversion, which hooks (1994) notes are critical early steps toward large-scale change.

Thomas indicated a more positive experience at his school, sharing that discussions around issues of justice and equity are encouraged: “After George Floyd, we had a big school meeting over Zoom and we talked about it...And then they have advisory for the students, and basically, they’ll have a lot of...open discussion type things and current events that are going on and units based on what’s happening in the world.” Thomas shared that this focus on open discussion echoed his experiences at University A, and he was often eager to continue learning through faculty reading groups and cross-curricular dialogue.

Another challenge that participants encountered was the transition from student teaching to building a new curriculum of their own as active teachers. Participants noted that as student teachers, they were expected to follow in the footsteps of their supervising practitioners and felt they did not have the freedom or autonomy to enact more critical approaches. Emily shared that her student teaching experience “was very guided...I couldn’t veer from someone else’s curriculum...so it was very cookie cutter.” This focus on replicating her supervising teacher’s curriculum was challenging for Emily when she began teaching on her own because she did not have experience designing and enacting her own curriculum, particularly one that was grounded in the critical and

social justice tenets she felt undergirded the ethos at University A. Thomas also reflected that his student teaching experience followed a more traditional model. He described it as “old-school... ‘band director at the front of the of the room’... You know, instead of just letting the students go off and learning it themselves.” Thomas noted that the feedback he received from a professor at University A encouraged him to think beyond these traditional models, but he often felt as though he did not have “real life” examples of what “thinking beyond” might look like. Emily’s and Thomas’s experiences point to the limitations of preservice music teacher education, providing examples of the challenges faced when attempting to bring broad pedagogical and theoretical ideas into practice in unique contextualized education environments, issues also noted by scholars (e.g., Ballantyne & Mills, 2008; Salvador & Kelly-McHale, 2017).

Participants noted that another challenge was working within the confines of pre-existing societal structures such as public school funding and grading systems. James shared that a particular challenge for him was working within inequitable funding and resources: “So much about how schooling works and traditional models are tied to capitalism, like everything from like, how grades traditionally work...to school funding.” While such topics were discussed at University A, James noted that actually living the realities of funding shortfalls was much different than learning about it in a classroom. He stated, “I teach in a poorer district and we’re just starting to see money from a state law that was changed like three years ago... we’re relying on wealthy people for individual gifts and for grants and things like that in lieu of them just paying their fair share and taxes and us having well-funded schools.” Like Emily and Thomas, James’s experiences suggest that the vast differences and inequities in learning environments can provide challenges for preservice music education programs seeking to prepare students for future teaching contexts. Neumann (2013) argued that this is often due to an inability for preservice programs to prepare students for the vast array of contexts that exist in the educational world.

Emily noted that a particular challenge for her was being confined to a traditional grading system that left little room for students’ individuality. While varying assessment practices had been discussed at University A, she was unsure how to implement such practices within mandated school-based systems. She argued that “grades themselves are not socially just...so how do you create a curriculum within a system that you’re kind of stuck in as well?” Thomas agreed that he felt that the grading process was a barrier for him in truly enacting fair, just teaching, and that grades were often not always truly reflective of a student’s abilities. All three participants suggested that grades were indicative of larger issues within the system of schooling, pointing to how assessment and accountability structures often made critical, process-oriented teaching and learning challenging in their settings.

Social Justice as a Fluid Disposition

Participants considered social justice to be a state of constant learning and progress. They indicated that a key element of a socially just music program is criticality, and they

defined this as constantly scrutinizing one's practices and beliefs, a practice they had engaged in during University A coursework. Specifically, participants noted the importance of engaging in reflection throughout their coursework, highlighting the ways in which they were encouraged to reflect on their identities, actions, and philosophical beliefs as being of particular importance.

When asked what it means to be a critical educator, Thomas said, "I think [being critical] is something that I'm still very much working on as a young teacher...I don't think it's something that we can just say 'yes' and then never think about again, I think it's something that's always going to continually evolve." Thomas acknowledged that being a critical educator was not something that could be achieved, rather, it was a mindset of continuous reflection and evolution. Similarly, Emily noted that part of being a critical educator was acknowledging that the world and our students' needs are not the same as they were in the past and the willingness to evolve with students' changing needs, interests, and goals: "always moving forward, always creating new, and always creating within the present."

All three participants agreed that part of being a critical educator is the practice of constant self-reflection. Emily defined being a critical educator as "upholding certain pedagogical values and always being critical of yourself and reflecting upon what you're trying to bring into the classroom." She shared that for her social justice teaching meant "consistently reflecting, consistently wanting to move forward...the point of teaching is that you enter a profession in which you're always learning." James agreed, noting that "[A socially just educator] is one of those things that like I definitely tried to be, and I think that it's very weighty for me to declare, 'I am.'" Emily added that reflective practice included not only self-reflection but reflecting on her students' identities. This also included reflection on her reasoning for including specific content and making sure that everything she taught was purposeful. She noted that socially just teaching "means...to truly understand what you are teaching, why you are teaching it, and to whom you are teaching it...and to understand the consequence of teaching it and to understand the consequence of staying silent about it." Thomas shared that it was important to him to give his students the space for their own reflective practice, noting that learning to take the perspectives of others was important for his pedagogy: "When these things come up in the classroom, I more just facilitate a conversation in a dialogue and discussion." This focus on a dialogical model of education rooted in critical reflection was echoed by all three educators, each of whom noted that a critical pedagogy is one rooted in constant self-scrutiny, reflection, and discussion.

It is important to recognize that, according to Freire (1970) and hooks (1994), reflection is not something that simply appears because it becomes academicized in the classroom. Human beings engage in reflection as a daily part of their lived lives. Within this project, reflection was not viewed in such a broad sense, however. Rather, it was viewed as a deliberate and critical action. Fook and Askeland (2009) argued that reflection becomes critical when it is connected to "an analysis of power relations and how

the individual experience is unavoidably connected with the preservation of social structures of domination” (p. 290). Reflection then “emerges as a form of action, and embraces contexts, purposes, and alternative realities” (Kushner, 2006, p. 20). Importantly, Emily, Thomas, and James acknowledged that they had to build upon the critical reflection they had been taught at University A by both reflecting on their practice (as seen in comments on being well-read and Emily’s comments on being willing to constantly evolve) and reflecting in the moment (as seen in Thomas’ comments on facilitating dialogue as it arises in class). As such, reflection was not only something they did before or after teaching; it was also a fundamental part of their moment-by-moment teaching practice.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Themes generated during this study indicate that music teacher education programs can have an impact on in-service educators’ engagement in socially just practices, but there are still challenges educators face when trying to implement such practices. Participant responses highlighted the importance of framing all musical and pedagogical practices as flexible, fluid, and responsive. This means recognizing that critical music curricula cannot be stagnant nor one-size-fits all but must be constantly problematized, questioned, and adapted to fit the needs of diverse student populations. Aligning with findings with previous research (Ballantyne et al., 2016; Ballantyne & Mills, 2008), participants noted the importance of engaging with diverse texts and in opportunities for perspective taking while in preservice programs, which hooks (1994) argued could lead both to collaboration and positive, engaged debate. Targeted discussions, for example, about how curricula might be developed alongside various stakeholders (e.g., students, administrators, teachers, community members) within a given context might support understandings of adaptability as it relates to critical practice. When combined with continued learning and support, both of which Robinson (2017) noted are crucial for education development, reversals back to more “traditional” methods (Ballantyne & Mills, 2008; Salvador & Kelly McHale, 2017) may be mitigated.

Preservice programs might frame social justice and critical practice not as something that can be “achieved” nor as a label that can be earned. Rather, criticality could be presented and modeled as a series of lifelong habits and practices, recognizing that praxis does not have an end point (Freire, 1970). This may require music teacher educators to build curricula with music education students, learning alongside them and pointing to moments of flexibility and discomfort as norms are challenged. Such processes may model the intentional decentering of a singular privileged voice and may reinforce the notion that engaged pedagogy requires opportunities for multiple voices to be heard, valued, and considered in the context of the classroom (hooks, 1994). As music teacher educators practice engaged listening, consistently adapting their own curricula and pedagogy to support the growth of the students in the classroom while also working alongside administrators to develop curricular and policy changes that support flexible and fluid approaches to teaching practice, they are also modeling practices of

ongoing learning for preservice teachers. Follow-up discussions that encourage dialogue and collaborative problem-solving may also support metacognition as preservice music educators learn from music teacher educator modeling, and deliberate opportunities for reflection that invites students to critically examine the intersections of power, context, and practice (Fook & Askeland, 2009; Freire, 1970).

Findings also indicate that while students believed they were prepared to engage in socially just practices at the micro level (e.g., in the classroom through curricular and pedagogical decision-making), they felt significantly less prepared to do so at the macro level (e.g., working with administrators or navigating inequities at the state level). This was particularly true for James and Emily. Both felt confident in the choices they had made at the classroom level to support critical and justice-oriented practices but felt trapped within school-level systems. Interestingly, this mirrors their experiences in their university program. They both noted that there was tension between the music education department's commitment to practices that arced toward social justice (as seen, for example, in methods courses that supported critical reflection and multiple ways of making and knowing through music) and their experiences within the school and university as a whole (as seen in their experiences with a singular "right" way to perform).

When considered alongside Freire's (1970, 1987) conceptions of reading the world and praxis, it appears that participants felt they had the tools to critically read, reflect upon, and act in the realm of curriculum and classroom practice. They felt less prepared to critically read, reflect upon, and act in the context the professional cultures of their school settings. They demonstrated a preparedness to navigate diverse contexts as they related to student identity and experiences. Further, their comments suggest that they were able to draw upon past experiences of school and/or representations of teaching as well as their current experiences to acknowledge and name barriers they faced in constraining school environments (e.g., understandings of music education pedagogy, grading policies, funding inequities, large-scale change). However, their comments also suggest that they were unsure of how to act in the face of varying school governance structures and hierarchical relationships, such as when James was instructed to avoid hip-hop in the classroom and when Emily struggled to enact her school's grading policy. Thus, participants experienced a divide between classroom practices and the professional culture of school structures.

Preservice music educators might consider expanding notions of criticality beyond classroom practice toward larger school structures, thereby helping preservice music educators develop the language, dispositions, and discourses to not only understand macro level structures but, eventually, feel as though they may be able to act upon those structures. Scholars have shared recommendations for such practices, highlighting, for example, a focus on understanding holistic school governance and policy activism to support preservice teachers as they develop as professionals (Bylica & Schmidt, 2021). Tailoring these experiences to align with social justice oriented practice might support preservice teachers as they move into the field. Further, findings from this study indicate that transparency related to the challenges of institutional change might also be

important. Emily, for example, noted that her experiences in the music education program did not align with those in the larger school and university, mirroring her experiences as a PK-12 educator whose experiences in the classroom did not necessarily align with those in the school system as a whole. Though potentially challenging, deliberate and open discussions with students about both the disconnects and opportunities present in departmental, school-based, and university-wide change could potentially help preservice educators understand the complexities inherent in such processes, as well as the ways in which varied stakeholders feel able to act.

Finally, findings also suggest that preservice music education programs might engage with barriers music educators may face when enacting critical, socially just curricula. This includes both acknowledging the existence of barriers, and also actively working together to problem-solve when such barriers arise. Developing case studies, speaking with practicing educators and administrators navigating this challenging terrain, and holding ongoing dialogues about these challenges in real contexts may serve as opportunities to explore how future music educators might operate under such conditions. As Thomas noted, this can even be done amidst student teaching placements as supervising faculty members work with student teachers who may not know how to navigate social justice planning alongside their cooperating teacher. Working alongside administrators and school and community leaders to open discussions and develop an action-oriented approach to school vision and governance may support practices that not only name but actively seek to change oppressive structures (hooks, 1994). Further, though not discussed explicitly by the participants, learning to navigate oppressive legislation or opposing opinions, particularly when working in a context where socially just practices are not supported, may be beneficial.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Discussions surrounding the enactment of critical, socially just practices in music classrooms persists, particularly in the midst of divisive concept laws, increasingly diverse educational spaces, and ongoing educational reform. It is our belief that preservice programs cannot afford to ignore the multilayered complexity of how those practices are enacted in school settings. This may mean examining the ways in which educators connect with student identity, embrace student experiences, and challenge norms, and it may *also* mean helping novice educators gain skills to navigate macro level interactions at the school and district levels. Further, recognizing that educator learning does not stop once one graduates from a preservice program, we also stress the need for ongoing professional development for socially just practices that focuses on the unique needs of specific school contexts.

This study was small in nature, and future researchers might explore a broader participant pool. In particular, participants who are graduates of several different music education programs may offer a more comprehensive account of how preservice music education experiences impact practical teaching in relation to socially just practices. Further, the participants in this study all attended university and currently teach in the

same U.S. state. Expanding the pool to include individuals who teach in states that may have legislature restricting classroom content and pedagogy might provide further insight into the barriers and challenges novice music educators face when implementing critical curricula. Finally, this study relied solely on interview data and teacher self-reporting, thus leading to findings the focus on teacher perceptions only. Drawing from both observation and interview data and/or expanding the individuals who are interviewed to students, administrators, and university faculty may help add additional contextualization to the findings.

Endnote

¹ All institution and participant names are pseudonyms in accordance with IRB requirements.

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About the Authors

Isabella Harkopf teaches music at the Pre-K level at the Early Learning Center in Malden, MA where she strives to make music learning accessible and inclusive to the needs of all students. Isabella previously taught grades 4-6 music at Prospect Hill Academy Charter School in Somerville, MA, and grades K-2 music at Tobin Montessori School in Cambridge, MA. She is passionate about paving pathways for early-career music educators to critically examine traditional practices and implement strategies for reaching students of all backgrounds and identities. She received her Bachelor's Degree from Boston University where she studied Music Education and Woodwind Performance.

Kelly Bylica serves as Assistant Professor of Music Education at Boston University (USA) where she works with both undergraduate and graduate students. Originally from Chicago, Kelly taught general and choral music throughout the Midwestern United States and has also served on the teaching faculty of several community-based youth music programs. Kelly's research agenda is focused on curriculum and policy, critical pedagogy, and middle school musical experiences. She has presented on these and other topics at regional, national and international conferences. She has also published chapters in several edited volumes as well as articles in *Journal of Music Teacher Education*, *Arts Education Policy Review*, *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, *Journal for Popular Music Education*, among others. Kelly holds a PhD in music education from The University of Western Ontario and is the recipient of the 2020 Council for Research in Music Education Outstanding Dissertation award.