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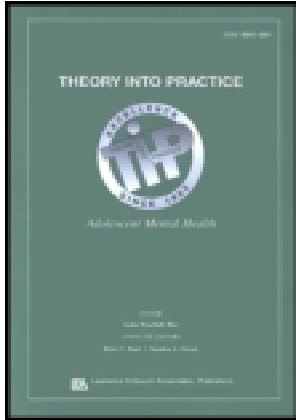

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Critical and Transformative Literacies: Music and General Education

Cathy L. Benedict [a]
[a] Florida International University

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Cathy L. Benedict

Critical and Transformative Literacies: Music and General Education

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Even though there are multiple literacies, the preoccupation and even reliance on the primacy of functional literacy, as seen as an end-point in the formal process of schooling, masks an ideology that rarely goes interrogated throughout all disciplines. This article considers the obligation and structure of functional literacy, and, in particular, scripted curriculum, as an imposition of meaning. Broad constructions of literacy, as have been addressed in the general disciplines (including mathematics, language arts, history, and science), provide a lens through which to consider those ways sequential, scripted curriculum and pedagogy frame all disciplines, most especially music.

Cathy L. Benedict is an assistant professor, and Coordinator of Music Education at Florida International University.

Correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Cathy L. Benedict, Herbert and Nicole Wertheim Performing Arts Center Modesto A. Maidique Campus, 10910 SW 17th St., Miami, FL 33132. E-mail: cathy.benedict@fiu.edu

"I AM A TEACHER, first, last, always," exclaimed Miss Jean Brodie as she attempted to regain ground, to be seen and to be heard (Cresson, Fryer, & Neame, 1969). I remove the phrase from its original context to make note that, as a music educator, I think of myself first and foremost as a teacher. And who does not? Indeed, many may not, because for many the title of music teacher is an important distinction. It is one that proclaims an identity tied to particular processes of teaching, some might even say creative processes of teaching—ones that are not anchored to the general educator's fate of day-to-day acts of teaching to the test. And, of course, this is a distinction that can be made because we are all quite sure of what and how the other teaches.

You may have met your music teacher because she teaches in your room during your prep time; she is the special that frees up time for your planning. Quite possibly, you ignore what she teaches, but you have a sense that it has something to do with what you might consider music literacy. And quite possibly, she ignores

what you teach, although she knows you teach reading, writing, and math. On the one hand, it may seem that you have nothing in common with the music teacher. She sings songs and gets to be creative (you've seen her play games with candy that teaches your students the names of the notes on the music staff). But on the other, you seem to have a lot in common; she seems to be teaching notes using steps and sequences that lead students to a lot of practice on the board and correct answers. It is a fairly reassuring process that is teacher-centered and mirrors the scripted reading and directed mathematics programs that are in use in your school. You may have to erase a bunch of straight lines and squiggles off the board after she leaves, but you don't think twice about her curriculum and pedagogy.

Readers of *Theory Into Practice* may find this scenario a bit distasteful, indeed offensive, at least parts of it. After all, discussions of what literacy is and what it is for have a constant presence in this journal. What may not strike you as odd, however, and probably not offensive (aside from the use of candy to teach and reward the acquisition of a concept) is a method of teaching music that teaches students how to read and write the names of the notes in a sequential almost scripted fashion. After all, isn't that what an education in music is—reading and writing music, or literacy?

The purpose of this article is to draw the attention of both music educators and general educators to the assumptions we make about the other and, particularly, to those ways that functional literacy pervades our disciplines. It is to make connections between scripted writing programs, teacher directed mathematics, and sequential music teaching and curriculum, and to emphasize to music educators that although they might be horrified to observe a teacher teaching a scripted lesson, these actions are not so far off from the scripted engagements of many music methods. And, finally, it is to underscore that just as there are general educators who desire curriculum and pedagogy that is driven by critical and transformative purposes, there are music educators who desire and work toward the same goal.

Few would deny that functional responses and engagements are significant; students are engaged and on-task; they provide a level of comfort for the teacher, student, principal, and parent; and they are sanctioned by accountability movements. The goal is to think away from functional literacy so that general educators can see the complexity of music endeavors and so that music educators can understand both meaningful engagements that are beyond functional literacy and the possible parallels and connections to disciplines outside of music.

Scripted Literacy

> Unfortunately, the current influx of scripted programs in reading and writing teaches students a counterfeit literacy, which encourages an obedience to the text—and ultimately—to the authority of a society in desperate need of questioning. (Christensen, 2006, p. 393)

In the university music education classes that I teach, I often raise the issue of *teacher-proof curriculum*. It is a phrase that does not immediately make sense to preservice teachers. As such, I liken the term to an object that is fireproof and ask them to consider those properties that might protect it from fire. We work back from there and when looks of astonishment creep over their faces, I recognize they have come to understand that teacher-proof curriculum means that care, creativity, mindfulness, and even the expertise of a teacher is being thought of as something from which a child needs to be protected. It takes more work to ask the students to consider this issue as one in which there is a hidden agenda seeking to disempower the teacher for ideological reasons (Giroux, 1988), but it is almost impossible to ask them to consider the large band, chorus, and orchestra ensembles from which they came as possible sites fuelled by "methodologies that appear to deny the very need for critical thinking" (p. 123).

Teacher-proof curriculum is no longer a fashionable term, most certainly because the goal was too obvious in the language. However, the not-so-subtle shift to scripted curriculum, or "guided

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instruction" (Saxon Math), has relocated the conversation away from the disempowerment of teachers to the needs of the students, an almost impenetrable first line of defense that makes questioning the effects of scripted curriculum troublesome and trouble making. For those who may not know, according to their descriptions, scripted curriculum is "backed by research" and is designed "to systematically teach decoding, comprehension, inquiry and investigation, and writing in a logical progression" (Open Court) and to "help all students achieve at the highest levels—not just children who come to school well fed, well rested, and ready to learn, but everyone, at all levels, whatever it takes" by providing "classroom resources and detailed lesson guides, designed to maximize support and minimize teacher preparation [and] help guide effective instruction" (Success for All). From a "criticalist standpoint" there is "much to discuss" (Morrell, 2010, p. 146) in language such as this. The coded reference that borders on racism, the pedagogical strategy of doing whatever it takes, and the false charity of minimizing teacher preparation is used to justify the need for sequential, teacher-proof, scripted curriculum. This is a curriculum whose continued existence demands constant surveillance and as such "undermin[es] the imagination, creativity, intelligence, and autonomy of students and teachers" (Kohl, 2009, p. 1). In schools in which there are worries of the "Open Court police," and being caught "discussing ideas or texts" (p. 2), "specials" seem to be the only option for free and creative spaces.

Music teachers may not have to worry about Open Court police, but we do have, and more importantly create, our own systems of accountability. Mandated repertoire, or repertoire that must be used in adjudicated festivals, is one way to assure quality programs and provide models of accountability to both principals and parents. Another is the legitimacy to be found in the commonsense practice of conceptualizing literacy as something bound by notation, or note reading and writing and other elements of music that are so often considered universal. Unfortunately, the power of such commonsense practices is that they serve to underscore the importance and even need for functional literacy; they express "what is already known—the obvious—and hence resist explanations about the complications we live" (Britzman, 1991, p. 7).

Functional Literacy

> Notation comes in many styles and forms; some are more specifically discernable than others, but all notation is doing is communicating the music from composer to performer, so if we can achieve that, we've achieved notation. (Marie O. undergraduate student)

I find the concept of *achieving notation* an interesting one. Marie intuitively thinks around the problematics of the functionality of correlating literacy with notation and seems to be grappling with this idea of notation as something that exists as a conduit for communication. Her thinking also suggests a broader engagement with what it means to communicate as something that transcends written scribbles on a page that need only to be accurately reproduced. She understands the need to communicate, indeed one would say she recognizes the functional aspect of notation, but she also identifies the limitations of thinking of notation as one set literacy. One might also read this as a frustrated reaction against traditional notions of what literacy is, or frustration over traditional music programs in which functional literacy is favored over musical experiences that are generated from personal engagements with music.

Gutstein (2006) believed that "a literacy is functional when it serves the productive purposes (i.e., maintaining the status quo) of the dominant interests in society" (p. 5). As I consider how particular kinds of musics and musicing practices serve the dominant interests in society (teaching and learning classical music still carries much cultural capital, as is manifested, for instance, in repertoire that counts at adjudicated festivals), there are parallels to be made with Gutstein's conception of functional and critical mathematical literacy and functional and critical literacy in music education. I have written elsewhere (Benedict, 2009) of the connections that can be made

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to particular music methods and the maintenance of musical practices and the exchange value these musical traditions garner. I have thought through how the tools of production—essential to individual creativity—have become sequenced, divided between many, and made part of a larger mode of production essentially separating creator from product. This division of the whole into smaller and deliverable (and testable) parts is hardly new to those who recognize in these processes similarities to scripted and teacher directed programs. However, what may not be so familiar is how this plays out in music education.

For instance, in elementary music settings music learning is often understood functionally as preparatory; music programs exist to teach students to read and write notation or, in other words, to prepare them for the larger band, choral, and orchestral ensembles (Kratus, 2007) that only a small percentage will join in middle and high school. In many of these programs teachers use particular music methods, or approaches (i.e., Kodaly and Orff) and a specific repertoire to teach music. The following two descriptions are taken from the Web sites of the Orff and Kodaly organizations (both of which are known and used by music educators worldwide):

- Orff is a way to teach and learn music and movement. (http://www.aosa.org/about.html)
- The Kodaly concept is a comprehensive program to train basic musical skills and teach the reading and writing of music. (http://oake.org/aboutus/kodalyphilosophy.aspx)

Not unlike the scripted and directed teaching that is offered in programs such as Open Court, Success for All, DISTAR Arithmetic, and Saxon Math, sequential, teacher-directed teaching methods can be seen as color blind and a pathway to even the playing field for students. Yet, an unconditional reliance on these methods or scripts to train students and teachers to produce particular kinds of learners and learning denies and prevents engagement with critical or transformative literacies.

Music teachers are no more creative than general educators simply because they are music teachers. There are possibilities for creativity in all disciplines, as well as spaces for collaboration, communication, and critical thinking: Being told "the ensemble is only as strong as its weakest link" does imply some level of cooperation, but participation in an ensemble does not necessarily transfer to collaboration and reciprocal communication. Solving compositional and even improvisational tasks that center on given musical parameters, writing lyrics to known songs, and knowing about different musical genres does suggest a level of creativity and critical thinking. However, I would point out that even though these activities demonstrate an "alphabetic literacy" (as cited in Tierney, Bond, & Bresler, 2006), they lead, as Christensen (2006) suggested, primarily toward the equivalent of "fake papers that no one wants to write and no one wants to read" (p. 393).

One may ask, "What about multiculturalism and other musics present in classrooms?" Isn't the inclusion of these musics a response to a call for integrated, connected, and critical curriculum? Could these not be considered the analogue to whole-language programs, primary sources, and problem-based mathematics? Music education ideology today guarantees that there will be varied musics inside the classroom and such musics do appear as the possibility of critical engagements with the world through the incorporation of primary sources. However, as Morton (2001) reminded, multicultural music education needs to "[articulate] a socio-political mandate to expose inappropriate musical signifiers and delineated meanings . . . that reproduce dominant ideologies and stereotypes, and romanticize economic and social hardship" (p. 40). One need only to refer to the Bradley article in this issue to realize how primary musical sources can be watered down in such a fashion that they retain, insist, and even protect engagements that are functional, rather than critical or transformative.

Critical and Transformative Literacies

Gutstein's (2006) work with mathematics curriculum is an example of how critical and transformative literacies can work in tandem with

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functional literacies. Rather than beginning with the formation of functional skills and then hoping that teachers will get to it or that students will make a leap to critical and transformative acts in and with the world, Gutstein's (2006) point of reference was first and foremost that students will, during their course of mathematical studies, "investigate and critique injustice, and to challenge, in words and actions, oppressive structures and acts—that is, to 'read and write the world' with mathematics" (p. 4). There may be those willing to think of literacy as having multiple dimensions; more though, may be reluctant to think of the educative process as one in which the goal is to "understand the sociopolitical, cultural-historical conditions of one's life, community, society, and word; and to write the world [in order to] effect change in it" (Gutstein, 2006, p. 4). On the other hand, those who do recognize that students come to school with varied and multiple literacies including those meaning-making practices from home, popular culture, technology, sports, and culture (Perry, 2006), but use these literacies simply as a springboard toward a literacy that "counts," ignore the ethical implications involving a pedagogical sleight of hand that is in essence an act of "cultural genocide" (Delpit, 1995, p. 30).

Many, if not all, music educators recognize that students come to school with a range of musical understandings that are culturally constructed and, in many cases, quite sophisticated. Students are hearing and engaging with musics in their homes and communities that are as varied as they are multiple. They come with technological skills that grow exponentially and cultural experiences that are different from our own. In short, they come with multiple literacies. The challenges are numerous. Just as there are for their counterparts in general education, there are national, state, and city standards in music education to which curriculum is linked. Unlike their counterparts in general education, however, music educators more often than not graduate from school music programs and college music education programs that have essentially looked and functioned the same for generations. For the most part, it is safe to say that music teachers have not experienced literacy (in and out of music programs) as critical or transformative (Hall & Piazza, 2010). They have, however, had multiple opportunities to "silently consume other people's words" (Christensen, 2006, p. 393). As such, the reliance on methods or even teaching to national or state standards provides a level of safety and certainty for them and recognizability to those who will observe and take account of their teaching.

As a recent example, the student teachers I have been assigned to observe this past semester have never taken a class with me. In fact, prior to their official observations, our only engagements together consisted of two quick business meetings; as such I had no idea what to expect from their teaching. As I observed them with students, there were brief moments in which I witnessed the abandonment of how they thought they were supposed to be teaching—in one case, the student teacher took out his guitar and in the other the student teacher sat at the piano and improvised music in the moment. Both facilitated different kinds of musical encounters, but, unfortunately, these disappeared as soon as they reminded themselves to return to the business of teaching music. With the exception of those moments when they were allowed to engage with the musicality of the teacher, the high school students' *schooled literacy* was clearly evident as they sat with great patience bound by infinite boredom.

What would music programs look like that took to heart conceptions of curriculum, pedagogy, and thus literacy as one in which students took on the skills, habits, and desires to defy "obedience to the text—and ultimately—to the authority of a society in desperate need of questioning" (Christensen, 2006, p. 393)? First of all, it is not enough to attend to this task as a disciplinary specific goal. School leadership does exist that sees the need for students to experience disciplines and disciplinary thinking and learning as a school-wide process and certainly this has been the goal of integrating curriculum. However, as Jacobs (1989) has pointed out, when one thinks only from the standpoint of the integration of content and disciplines, integration is less than effective. Although Jacobs (1989) warned that

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integrative planning should be concerned with providing "a cognitive taxonomy to encourage thinking skills" (Chapter 1) such directives (and taxonomies) do not necessarily necessitate or involve multiple, or even critical and transformative, literacies. There may be similar educative purposes and goals within a school, but without what might be considered pedagogical alignment and agreement among all teachers, critical or transformative education will remain out of reach. Just as we do not want general education programs in which reading comprehension is viewed as the ability to "[parrot] back the teacher or the textbook" (Christensen, 2006, p. 393), or mathematics and science as solving teacher generated real-world math problems and proving scientific proofs, we do not want music programs in which the only goal is reading and writing notation and reproducing great works of art that have stood the test of time. So, for instance, rather than just teaching a piece of music, Thibeault (2010) offered several suggestions that give "students opportunities to create their own knowledge" (p. 30). Included among his many suggestions are "creating visualizations of the work, an audio guide, interviewing others about the work, creating and sharing melody books, recording and sharing rehearsals, remixing the rehearsal and the score, and holding a digital dress rehearsal" (pp. 31–35).

Clearly, the idea is not to get rid of large ensembles in favor of establishing guitar ensembles, mariachi groups, or technology and recording studios, as happened recently in a high school in Queens, New York. It cannot be an either/or situation. It is to think of, however, the creation of curricular and pedagogical space in which musical thinking and doing is tied to critical and transformative literacies. What would it mean to read and write the world with music? Pedagogy and curricular goals would take into account small group engagements, generative repertoire, the use of multiple literacies in outreach and community research, composition and production projects so that students could "investigate and critique injustice, and to challenge, in words and actions, oppressive structures and acts" (Gutstein, 2006, p. 4).

In this issue, Allsup identifies educators who are engaging differently with the development and purpose of music programs—including the use of constructivist practices, critical and feminist perspectives, and democratic rationales. Even though he has a (valid) concern that these programs will be treated as outliers by larger musical organizations, my concern (and one that is not at odds with his) is that without placing these musical programs within the larger whole school context, critical and transformative literacies and pedagogies remain as disciplinary silos, effectively rendering them functional.

Lingering Thoughts

I would like to further contemplate the notion, the leap of faith as it were, that functional literacy skills will "challenge, inspire, and prepare [students] for a better future" (Success for All), a conception of faith Kierkegaard (2006) challenged. For Kierkegaard, the movement of faith was neither purposeful nor self-conscious, nor could it be seen as "something we still have to do (to bridge a gap) after we have appreciated the options" (Ferreira, 1998, p. 214). Although it may seem that this movement, or letting go of our students into the world, is what Kierkegaard imagined, Kierkegaard wanted people to stop at doubt. Faith is not based on a cumulative process of gradual, quantitative change, nor is it a leap made by, or of, faith. It is, rather, a qualitative movement to faith; a leap required irrespective of the evidence. It is the letting go and, in this case, letting go irrespective of the need of evidence or tangible, measurable proof that we can make a difference in this world. For those who believe that functional literacy prepares people for the real world, it seems to me that there is a sense of a blind kind of hopeful-hope, in which the present is sacrificed for a future that desires to protect the past. This is not the hope of Freire (1994) that is "rooted in practice, in the struggle" (p. 8), rather this is the "extravagant hope" of Hoffer's (1951) that leads to "reckless daring" in which the "hopeful can draw strength from the most ridiculous sources of power—a slogan,

a word, a button" (p. 9). I continue to believe, as many of us do, that it is possible (necessary) to live in and with hope that speaks to action based on both doubt and belief. Recognizing and embracing critical and transformative literacies throughout all disciplines rather than "counterfeit literac[ies]" (Christensen, 2006, p. 393) that further the hegemonic goals of the "real world" opens up the possiblities, as Marie so beautifully said, of "achieving notation."

Notes

1. An adjudicated festival is one in which students or ensembles prepare particular repertoire and then are judged, ranked, and given a score. In many instances, school music programs publish these rankings and students use these scores as part of their college application process. One may simply search, for instance, *NYSSMA Gold* for many such announcements.
2. See National Endowment for the Arts. (2009).

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