

## A beautiful cacophony:

### A call for ruptures to our 'democratic' music education

**A**s music classroom populations have diversified, with school music repertoires and the range of pedagogical practices following suit, recent years have seen music education scholarship highlight issues of democracy, inclusion and equality in schools. Finland and other Nordic countries have been seen as models for this student-centred approach, focusing not only on teaching music per se, but on teaching the child. However, this is not only seen as an approach that is centred on the individual—Finnish music education is also concerned with how individual students fit into, and contribute towards, a larger collective. As Heimonen (2014) explains, Finnish schooling aims to develop individual students' knowledge and skills, as 'autonomous human beings capable of living and acting collectively in a democratic society' (Ibid., 197). But more than this, it has been argued (e.g. Westerlund 2002) that Finnish music education, particularly in schools, is not simply a means to prepare students to live and contribute towards a democratic society, but that music education spaces and practices should be democratic in themselves. The school is then envisioned as a place where teachers, students, parents, musicians, policy makers and others are all part of a democratic community, emphasizing participation, inclusion and equality. This is a rather familiar idea for many researchers and teachers as we often hear seemingly unproblematic phrases such as 'the school community'; 'the music education community'; 'the research community'; 'us'; 'we'.

However, this 'democracy' may be an impossible ideal. In this essay, we argue that at least the matter is considerably more complex.

### A stultifying 'democracy' in harmonious music education

Almost a century ago philosopher John Dewey wrote: 'There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication' (MW9: 7). All three are important to consider if we are to understand the problems that might be associated with the 'democratic' music education described above. Firstly, the notion of a *community* in music education is hinged on the idea that the individuals that comprise the 'us' or the 'we' share something in *common*.

Dewey argued that through learning and constantly revising previously held beliefs, a school community could, through explicit negotiation processes, reach a state of agreement. This involves a give and take, making compromises in the interests of working *together*. As music education philosopher Paul Woodford (2005) writes, democracy allows for disagreement, but 'implies communication and striving toward *common* goals... [T]he intent is... to arrive at some level of mutual understanding and respect' (Ibid., 50, emphasis added). But is difference really respected through this *communication*, if the goal is to agree? Do we—or should we—have *common* goals?

Some researchers (e.g. Kallio 2015; Mantie & Tucker 2012; Schmidt 2008) have raised questions about the achievability of this democratic vision in music education, if we take into account *who* is involved in negotiating the goals and values of the community—asking if a fair, democratic compromise can be reached in institutions (for instance schools) that are constructed upon unequal power relations. Kallio (2015) has suggested that as a result of certain voices being legitimised at the expense or marginalisation of others, 'if we are to think of schools as communities united by shared values, this community may be constructed

more through coercion and exclusion, than diversity and inclusion' (Ibid., 50). Gould (2008) has argued that these illusions of democracy that do nothing to 'change or even challenge power relations' (Ibid., 30) rather support systems of domination that assimilate and eradicate difference. In this way she describes democracy as 'devouring the Other' (Ibid., 37).

If all voices are equal and difference is truly valued, a democratic community cannot be based on an idealised vision of communication that results in *consensus*—a happy ending to the *problems* that disagreement and diversity introduce. If we are to take inclusion seriously, difference and disagreement are not hindrances to overcome. As Schmidt (2008) reminds us, democracy does not 'embrace only the unitary, the consensual, the affirmative, and the constructive: it must also contend with the multiple, the conflictual, and the destructive' (Ibid., 16). The question is then: if consensus democracy is an impossible ideal, or worse, a system of oppression, what roles *should* the 'multiple, the conflictual, and the destructive' play in music education contexts and practices?

French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2014), in his book *Hatred of Democracy*, argues that the central problem with democracy, as has been discussed here, is simply that,

*there will never be, under the name of politics, a single principle of the community, legitimating the acts of governors based on laws inherent to the coming together of human communities.* (Ibid., 51)

By this, Rancière means that if consensus in a community is impossible, the justifications for the actions of the powerful (such as teachers making decisions for their classes, selecting which songs to sing at school events, and so on) *cannot* be said to be grounded in a fully participatory democracy in which *all* voices are equal. Such an idea of democracy, as a community founded on agreement—even one reached through negotiation—is stultifying: it rests on the idea that there is always someone who knows best, pointing the way towards agreement and guiding those who are unable 'to see' what is best for them. Think of the metaphors so often used for teaching: the lighthouse, the guide, the gardener—explicating the truth, lighting the way, showing the path, or tending to those unable to grow or find their way on their own. For Rancière, and for us, this is a dead end that negates the differences and disagreements—the *ruptures*—that are a prerequisite for democratic action.

### Ruptures as a resource

It has been argued that educational democracy seems to idealize the types of communication that produce consensus by actively promoting practices where differences are not so much welcomed, but temporarily tolerated, until they are guided or 'taught' to assimilate, develop or change, thereby upholding the goals of unity and agreement. It is thus not surprising that music education emphasizes processes of *becoming*: with students *becoming* more musical, *becoming* more confident, *becoming* more tolerant, *becoming* more knowledgeable, *becoming* more technically proficient, *becoming* more like 'us'. We argue that it is important to take a step back, and ask ourselves as teachers and researchers what these students are being educated *for*, and who it is we want them to *become*.

The risks of a music education founded on *becoming*, risks fortifying what Rancière calls the 'myth of pedagogy' (1991, 6), which divides the world into those who are capable and those who are *incapable*. This, at its very conception, assumes that certain abilities, values, and beliefs are better than others. In other words, certain voices are privileged and others are dismissed as inferior. If participation on the basis of equality is a fundamental component of democracy (Rancière 1991, 6–7), then it is clear that the so-called democratic school community is not democratic. Think, for instance, how music education conceptualises and addresses gifted education and special education—or music therapy. Whose voices count in those contexts? Laes and Schmidt (forthcoming) have suggested that there are considerably

more complex ethical issues at hand than those presented through the practical dichotomies of ability that have for so long guided the goals and methods of education. This is not to suggest that the differences between students should be disregarded or that we should somehow ‘equalize’ everything and everyone. Rather than aiming at consensus in values, abilities, purpose and beliefs in our education, we might agree with Rancière in that the only thing *common* in contemporary music classrooms is disagreement, difference, and change. However, far from seeing these as obstacles to tolerate, or challenges to overcome through assimilation or ‘equalizing’, we argue that these characteristics may be a *resource* for teaching and learning. This may be through providing opportunities and invitations for ruptures to what has henceforth remained unquestioned and unchallenged—what has been *agreed* upon.

Rancière (2001) introduced the concept of *rupture* in his effort to make a case for why we might find value in dissensus, through disagreement disturbing the peaceful and unproblematic flow of daily life. As the word suggests, rupture indicates a disturbance to the status quo, often a sudden and violent break in the normal flow of things. Finding value and promise in rupture, Rancière (2001) argued that the very concept of democracy has been misunderstood,

*[democracy] is not a political regime, but rather—a rupture in the logic of arche—that is, in the anticipation of rule in the disposition for it.* (Rancière 2001, n.p.)

Thought this way, rupture does not entail an emancipation of the oppressed, in a way that allows them to move from a minority position to join, or usurp the majority. It does not mean that everyone becomes equal in relation to each other either (indeed, in Rancière's view equality is not a desirable state to aim for, see for example Rancière's (1991) descriptions of how schoolmaster Jacotot does not see education as a process where people in unequal position become equal as they receive knowledge from those who know: rather, the process of ‘becoming equal’ maintains and produces inequalities). Rather, it means that there is a constant *dissensus* that makes the appearance of different voices and different subjectivities possible, visible and audible. Rancière (2001) notes that a rupture cannot be designed, but emanates from the people, and exists in possibility. In its realisation, a rupture is a break, a fissure, a disturbance that is provoked by dissensus. As such, dissensus and ruptures may be seen as opportunities, potentials and invitations.

### Hearing the beauty in cacophony

Education, and schools as institutions in particular, cannot ever be free from power. If, in problematizing notions of inclusion that arise from visions of democracy-as-consensus, we, as music teachers, students, parents, policy makers, academics, researchers and others, ought to open the doors to ruptures in what we have come to see as the ‘norm’, as ‘good’, as ‘productive’, as ‘learning’, the question is then posed: what does this look like (or indeed, sound like) in practice?

The answer may lie in a reconceptualisation of music education from harmonious spaces, practices and sounds, to find the beauty and potentials of cacophony. The implications of a *cacophonous* music education may be in our conceptualisation of community and democracy, and the role *communication* has in enacting these ideas. The aim of inclusion cannot be to ‘accommodate’, ‘tolerate’, or ‘transform’ difference with the idea to reproduce harmony or consensus. Difference, and the equality of individuals - not in spite of, but *because* of—their differences, should be welcomed—regardless of whether or not the combination of these individual melodies, rhythms, meters, and timbres are always pleasing to the ear. Communication is then not a means to work towards harmonious agreement, but a means to *hear* and be *heard*.

Although in recognising, and hearing this cacophony, there is a loss of certainty with

regard to who is a 'legitimate' participant in the choir and the song that is being sung, this is a potentially exciting shift in considering what (good) music is, and who is musical. In fact, it demands a dramatic reconsideration of what music education is *for*. The certainty of *who* 'we' are, and the teacher's role in the classroom (if it is not to explicate the truth and guide the way), are replaced by a never ending questioning. This may open up limitless possibilities and new potentials as questions of *who*, *where*, *when*, *why* and *what* for take centre stage.

The *common* is not something that is shared and assumed, but something that is constantly debated and challenged, revised and reconstructed. In order to achieve this dynamism, there must be room made for the unexpected and surprising. In making room, we call for a 'rupture in the current logic' (Rancière 2001) that prevails in music education, calling for a reconsideration of what is now considered 'democratic' or 'equal'.

Rancière (1999) suggests that in the contemporary world, ideas of equality, justice, and values are continuously (re)enacted, (re)negotiated and contested. If we are to take this seriously in music education, the processes and questioning involved may not be smooth or pleasant; conflicts, exclusions, oppressions and injustices may even be *necessary* conditions for learning and change. Thus, we argue that we need to reconsider the conceptualisation of democracy as a balance sheet (Rancière 1999, 96) for teaching and learning, and recognize the processes of domination, exclusion and the stultifications inherent in music education contexts that are so often framed as promises for 'democracy'. ■

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