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Minding the Tragic Gap: Conversations of Invisibility in Early Childhood Music Education

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Minding the Tragic Gap

Conversations of Invisibility and Reform in Early Childhood Music Education

During the last few decades, the music education profession has slowly begun to recognize the impact of music experiences in early childhood. Key publications in the 1970s drew attention to music education for young children (Greenberg 1976, Simons 1978, Zimmerman 1972). Articles focusing on young children's musical development appeared in the 1980s (Hargreaves, 1986; Peery, Peery, & Draper, 1987; Sloboda, 1985; Swanick & Tillman, 1986). MENC (now the National Association for Music Education—NafME) began to address early childhood music education through “focus days” attached to biennial national conferences and through the establishment of the Early Childhood Special Research Interest Group. Yet in general, the music education profession lags behind other disciplines in recognizing the needs of young children. In this “gap” of recognition, young children remain an under-represented population in the music. How do we change the perception of young children's musical capabilities and abilities with parents, preservice teachers, and colleagues?

In this article, we use “minding the gap”—a British term used to warn train passengers of the gap that exists between the train car and the station platform—as a metaphor that speaks to a need for heightened awareness about deficiencies early childhood music education, including gaps in music teacher preparation. Palmer (2009) refers to a “Tragic Gap” as the inevitable, inexorable, inescapable place where we have a choice, where tension resides between what is and what can be, between “corrosive cynicism” and “irrelevant idealism” (p. 8). There is energy and possibility in the gap, and Palmer suggests that we stand *in* the gap and *name* it. We recognize and experience the tension between *what is* and *what could be* in early childhood music education, in-

cluding the preparation of preservice teachers for early childhood music teaching and the polarizing socioeconomic and political matters associated with educating poor children, as a significant and tragic “gaps” which we must “mind”. This article takes the form of a three-strand narrative with each author weaving her perception of the tragic gap metaphor in early childhood music education.

Narrative One: The Children

Julia, a 20-year veteran of early childhood music education in public and private schools, examines the tragic gap metaphor through a reflection on her experiences teaching a class of pre-school children on a day that most Americans will remember forever. She then shares her current work as a teacher educator and administrator in an early childhood community music program and asks a larger question concerning the realities and “gaps” that prevent all preschool children—regardless of socioeconomic or cultural privilege—from receiving a quality music education.

A Tragic Gap: September 11, 2001

The morning of this terrible day, in my desert home far away from where the actual events were happening, I was as fearful as every American. My instinct was to pull my family close, to hunker down and shelter them in the insulated safety of our home. My family and I decided that the healthy and even patriotic decision would be to try to make the day as normal as possible. Frightened parents and teachers arrived at the preschool where I worked as the music teacher, trying to maintain a façade of normalcy for the children and the business of running a school.

I numbly sat on the floor in the music room surrounded by circles of singing and dancing three-

year-olds while my heart was consumed with fear for the darkness that had so violently entered our lives.

As I moved through the motions of that music lesson, I remember having a “snap out of it” moment—a feeling of awareness and sense of deep purpose that this work of making music with children, if done well, with intention, skill, and integrity, was going to be my way of bringing light into the darkness. It would be my way of standing in the tension between corrosive cynicism and irreverent idealism. I knew I loved making music with young children and that I viewed it as important for many reasons, but at that moment in 2001, I also knew that my place in the gap between the dark and the light was on the floor doing the important and joyful work of learning about, teaching, sharing, and making music with children.

I was teaching in three different preschools at the time. School One was my son’s school—where I determinedly taught on 9/11/01—a Reggio-Emilia-centered, play-focused, emergent curriculum preschool where art, sewing, drama, gardening, and music were woven into every day. A small percentage of children attended on scholarships, but the majority paid full tuition. Most arrived at school having had their needs well met at home.

The demographics of other two schools represented a different place in the social and economic hierarchy of the city. My job in these schools was made possible by a one-year grant funded by the Public Service Company of New Mexico with the intention of bringing music to underserved populations. One school was located in a turn-of-the-century stone building in Albuquerque’s downtown, an area surrounded by food kitchens and homeless shelters. The school’s fenced in playground bordered a busy downtown street. Ninety percent of families served by this center met state poverty guidelines; 53% of the children lived in single-parent families, and all children received a daily hot lunch. Funding sources included the United Way and the New Mexico Children, Youth

and Families Division. Whereas the focus of the Reggio-Emilia school my son attended was on enrichment and emergent curriculum, the downtown center focused mainly on life skills and school readiness.

The third school at which I taught was located in a converted adobe home in a bucolic residential pocket of Albuquerque’s Rio Grande valley sandwiched between the railroad and industrial warehouses. The beautiful nature-oriented and child-friendly playground of this school had been lovingly created and maintained by a local Albuquerque family for many years. Half the families paid full tuition, while the other half paid varying degrees of reduced tuition thanks to funding from government and community service organizations.

Throughout the 2001-2002 year, I noticed a stark contrast in the role of music in these three very different settings. In Reggio-Emilia school, children experienced music classes with me two to five times a week. The assumed but rarely articulated reason for music was to provide enrichment, musical development, and natural-emergent creative expression.

In downtown and neighborhood schools, children experienced music classes with me two mornings a week. I also modeled for the teachers, provided after-school workshops for them, and purchased resources, instruments, and props for the schools. The goal of my grant-paid year was for the teachers to feel better equipped to incorporate music into their curricula. Both schools served children from lower income families, and it was clear that the funding secured was intended to bring music into these institutions because many of children came from families in poverty, violence, or other forms of crisis, and therefore needed something beautiful in their not-so-beautiful lives.

Teaching in these three different settings during that year illustrated for me the many gaps between children living in poverty and children

living in privilege. Yet, no matter the social or economic demographics, no matter the school's curricular objectives or its physical setting, the joyful responses of the children (and the staff) to music experiences and the desire for music experiences in all three schools was similar.

Today, the tragic gap in the lives of pre-school-aged children in New Mexico and elsewhere remains. In an international review of studies of preschools for underserved populations, Burger (2010) found that these programs

. . . usually strive to establish equality of educational opportunity for children from different social backgrounds because children growing up in environments with little cognitive stimulation do not have the same chance to develop their abilities as children from more privileged families. (p. 30)

When music education is included in these settings, it exists in the gap between socioeconomic privilege and socioeconomic disadvantage, and often becomes part of the work of striving for "equality of educational opportunity for children from different social backgrounds" (Burger, 2010, p. 30). However, the daily caretakers and teachers who work with children may feel unprepared to include music experiences in what they do with children or self-conscious about their musical abilities, and music educators in early childhood settings are few and far between.

My own work is now centered on both teacher education and administration in early childhood education, where the gaps between socioeconomic privilege and disadvantage in early childhood education remain and the role of music education in those gaps takes different forms. As I work

with pre-service teachers in New Mexico, I find it useful to highlight the existing gaps. The most obvious gap is that of economic poverty and abundance; New Mexico has one of the highest child poverty rates in the country. In an attempt to close this gap in early childhood education settings, the New Mexico Legislature passed the Early Childhood Care and Education Act to establish a comprehensive early care and education system through an aligned continuum of state and private programs (NMHB296, 2011). The purpose of this legislation is to bring together the many organizations and people serving children in united strength. Hopefully, there will be great opportunities (and funding) for early childhood music this aligned continuum of programs.



While we are an economically poor state, one of our greatest assets is our rich cultural diversity. Within our culture of poverty, we must be cognizant of our environment of abundance, available

in every town, state, tribe, village; early childhood music educators need to find away to unite with those currently providing services, to collaborate with the culture bearers in the communities, and with the centers, the universities, the schools, and the families.

One example of this potential happened this past spring. Music education students at our university had an opportunity to work with a Youth Development Incorporated (YDI) preschool center in Albuquerque. YDI, a nationally recognized youth service organization, provides educational, developmental, and humanitarian assistance to children, youth, and families in central and northern New Mexico. The director of the center contacted us for a one-time visit by music students to give demonstrations on their instruments. After the successful visit the director wrote: *"Everyone at our center is so appreciative and our students*

absolutely loved the chance to learn about the instruments and sing along!”

I enjoyed sharing this experience with my college students and we saw the hunger in the community for early childhood music. In the tension between abundance and poverty, privilege and disadvantage, there are children who want to sing, dance, and make music. We, all of us who care about early childhood music, need to nurture our own communities’ rich cultural abundance and find ways to nourish the poverty.

Narrative Two: A Childcare Provider

This second narrative is written in the voice of Shelly, a 30-year veteran of music education in public schools and higher-education institutions. She begins this narrative by examining the tragic gap metaphor through a brief summary of professional development activities for teachers. She then shares her current, collaborative work with a preschool teacher whose classroom resides on a public school campus. Finally, she addresses the realities and “gaps” that prevent all preschool and/or childcare providers from receiving adequate training in music education for young children.

I was interested in examining whether observing and participating in music activities led by a music specialist would affect a preschool teacher’s perception of her personal music skills, ability to deliver music instruction to children, and perceptions of early childhood music education. I wanted to engage in a project that enabled conversation and collaboration, while also aiding in the development of holistic teachers and learners. My first task was to know the teacher’s perception of her own musicality, her level of music education, and what she already notices about children and music.

The Teacher and Setting

A music specialist did not service the preschool classroom selected—although housed within an elementary school campus—therefore, the pre-

school teacher was responsible for providing music activities. Natalie (pseudonym), in her late-20s, holds an associate’s degree and is currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree in education. She has been the lead teacher at this site for the past seven years. Student enrollment throughout the year ranged from 18 to 22 four-year-old children (with many turning 5 by the end of the school year). Natalie’s music background and training included playing clarinet during her elementary school years and attending a few music and movement training workshops. At the beginning of the year, I asked her how music fit in her classroom. She responded, “They seem to be happier and play better with each other when we have music playing. They sleep better with relaxation music.”

My second task was to figure out how to balance the children’s needs, appropriate music content, and the preschool teachers’ professional development needs. I hoped to avoid having my research appear unrelated to the day-to-day interactions with students. So, how could I cross borders—mind the gap—between research and practice?

According to Saunders and Baker (1991), many classroom teachers receive limited musical training in their preservice teacher education programs and consequently lack the skills and confidence to perform for their students. Preschool teachers—even more so than elementary education teachers—feel inadequately prepared to provide music activities to their students. Rust (2009) encourages those involved in research with practitioners to consider the following three questions: “1) What knowledge informs practice? 2) How does this knowledge become ensconced in a practitioner’s repertoire? and 3) How can new knowledge change practice?”

Professional development for teachers currently providing music instruction remains a crucial need. Yet professional development activities aren’t always successful (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Guskey, 1986; Hiebert et al., 2002; Lampert & Ball,

1999; Lieberman & Miller, 1991, 2001). The failure of most professional development activities relates in part to a failure to appreciate the change process, the developmental trajectory of professionals, and a lack of understanding of adult learning (Rust, 2009, Online). Adults—as much as children—are constructors of knowledge, need to be scaffolded when learning new material, need to engage in trial and error, need to practice new skills and receive feedback, and need to have models of practice (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Distilling essential characteristics of successful teacher professional development resulted in three key concepts: 1) focusing on issues and content specific to the teacher’s needs and integral to her work (Little & McLaughlin, 1993; Thompson & Zeuli, 1999), 2) integrated into the school day and school year to enable her to use the innovation (Hawley & Valli, 1999; Lieberman & Miller, 1991; Staub 2004), and (3) sustained over time (Fullan, 1993).

The Process

Every Wednesday morning throughout the school year, I facilitated a 25-30 minute music lesson with the children. The teacher, her two assistants, and student teachers participated and/or observed each lesson. Funds from a grant provided instructional materials (instruments, books, puppets, manipulatives, etc.). The lessons “loosely coordinated” with her curriculum but the intention was not to create integrated lessons, but rather make interdisciplinary connections in language and literacy skills while experiencing music. Following each lesson, Natalie received a printed copy of the lesson activities, including strategies regarding the delivery of music instruction. She also was provided multiple opportunities to ask questions.

Informal and formal interviews throughout the year provided additional insight into her teaching style, personal comfort with delivering music instruction, the children’s needs, and the program’s curricular needs. Also collected were anecdotal records, student work (e.g., drawings), photo-

graphs, and video recordings. I found it interesting that those times when I perceived the adults in the room being more observers than participants were the days that we had more discussions and interactions following the lessons.

Natalie’s Perceptions

During an interview, Natalie noted that the students talked about music class throughout the week. She also shared that the assistants talked with her about what they learned through the lessons and especially noted observing smooth transitions. “My fall student teacher was very intrigued by [the sessions]. She stated in the beginning that her weakness was music and movement. After a few observations she was much more comfortable and said she was very thankful to be a part of our classroom.”

Natalie began using the opening song from music class as her daily morning song. Her beginning of the year comments such as “The [children] seem to be happier and play better together when we have music playing,” and “They sleep better with music,” expanded as the year progressed. At the end of the year she shared, “I believe having music in our classroom opens up many doors for the child to be creative, have rhythm, coordination, be able to work together, and so much more.” Natalie expressed the importance of “comfort level” for delivery instruction. “I am very comfortable with helping children do anything if I know what I am doing. But, when it is something I haven’t practiced myself it makes it harder for me.”

Froehlich (2007) labels the vibrant complexity of discussions and exchanges “webs of interactions.” “From a sociological perspective, webs of interaction are not about whom we teach or what we teach or how we teach or why we teach; however, they are about the relationships among all these factors, and more that remain unknown” (Abeles & Custodero, 2010, p. 23). Promoting constant interaction between Natalie and myself promoted self-reflection for both of us. Conversations initiated by Natalie that included not only

“the how,” but “the why,” and the “what next” expanded as the year progressed.

I believe that my partnership with Natalie promoted constant interaction and self-reflection. Spending time in the classroom over the period of one year allowed me to identify the children’s needs, the teacher’s needs, and the curricular needs. I encourage others to engage in these types of partnerships to “close the gap” in the comfort level and expertise of childcare providers and preschool teachers currently facilitating music experiences with the children in their care.

Narrative Three: The Institution

Narrative three is written from the voice of Regina, also a thirty-year veteran of public schools and college teaching. She examines the metaphor of the tragic gap through the juxtaposition of a stated commitment to early childhood music vis-à-vis a successful community early childhood program housed in her department and limited teacher education opportunities for early childhood music education. Regina presents several vignettes that illustrate a conflict in music teacher identity development through the lens of an important construct in early childhood education—the singing voice. Finally, she presents a model for change, the creation of an early childhood methods course and its place in a music education curriculum.

Vignette One

The panel of three music education faculty are sitting behind a long table ready to listen to singing juries required for all music education major before they may enroll in methods classes. Each student is expected to sing two unaccompanied folk songs from memory as well as sight read eight bars of music and give an advocacy speech. Sandra, an energetic student leader with a bright disposition enters the room. She is “all smiles” at first. We put her in the designated “singing” spot and ask her to sing “All the Pretty Little Horses”. Immediately, Sandra’s smile begins to fade, she

inhales quickly, looks to the ceiling and begins in the right key—but quickly loses her tonal center. She seems embarrassed and rushes to the end of the song. We ask her to sing “Buffalo Gals”—and the same thing happens. Exasperated, she looks at the panel and says in frustration, “all I want to do is teach orchestra, why do I have to memorize these ridiculous songs?” She leaves the room crying.

Vignette Two

It is the first day of Elementary Methods—a required course for all music education majors. As a greeting, I start into “All Around the Brickyard” and invite the students to clap along and do the motions suggested by the song. They comply but are clearly uncomfortable moving to a children’s song. I sing it once in its entirety and then motion for them to follow me; phrase by phrase. Throats are cleared—legs begin to uncross, the students begin to look up. But there doesn’t seem to be much joy in the room. Hoping for a better response, I try another song. I bounce the ball to a young man (student conductor of the jazz band) and invite him join with in on the numbers as I sing “One, two, three A’Leary.” He smirks, then bounces the ball to me but no singing comes.

Vignette Three

Michael, a six foot four euphonium player, is a junior in music education. He had no idea he would be teaching 5-year-olds how to use their voices like a roller coaster—much less that he would actually be doing it himself. His music education identity was heavily invested in the marching band culture that permeated his high school and college music experiences. After passing his sophomore review with flying colors Michael was eligible to start his methods courses. His voice was a strong clear baritone and he found great joy in singing. He was a natural and joyful music teacher and especially came to love his time with a kindergarten class in his teaching lab experience. Yet, neither his applied teacher nor his ensemble directors supported his love of

teaching very young children. In his student teaching placement interview they both teased him by insinuating that his elementary music placement was sub-par to the important and difficult work of directing a high school band.

Music Teacher Identity

What does it mean to be a music education major? In most institutions in the United States, in the first few years, there is a heavy emphasis on developing musicianship skills through theory, music history as well as performance skills in both solo and ensemble settings. Students further along in their music education studies have more concrete ideas about their “readiness to teach” and at what level they would like to teach as they continually participate and succeed or fail in the particular social cognitive framework (O’Neill, 2001) of a collegiate music education program.

Conway (2002) argues that most music teachers begin their development as teachers long before they ever come into an undergraduate music program. While all programs are different, and based on social norms and contexts of the particular region, musical culture and teaching faculty, there are certain identity roles nurtured and developed based on sociological factors that affect all students. Isbell (2008) suggests that music education majors enter college with strong musician identities that reflect the influence of significant people and events from their youth. Parents and school music teachers are the primary influences on pre-college music students.

In the various settings where music making occurs—community, school, and church—these young musicians are being socialized as performers and general musicians, more so than as future educators. Isbell (2008) notes a central part of music educators’ secondary socialization is formed through the experience of being a college music major in which the significant memories, and identity formation are also based on performance in ensembles, peer solidarity (such as study and practice partners), juries, applied les-

sons and recitals mentioned above—again, more in the area of musicianship development than acquiring teaching skills.

In the above vignettes, singing, while valued in the curriculum and by music education faculty was not looked upon as an important skill set by students because most formed their primary occupational socializations around perceptions of themselves as high school choral or instrumental teachers and their secondary socializations were centered around achieving musicianship mastery.

Despite much research in the area of the importance of early childhood music, few college programs prepare pre-service music teachers to work with pre-kindergarten children. In the narrative that follows, I describe how my colleagues and I advocated for and realized the creation of an early childhood methods course requirement for music education majors based on a need arising from our community music school.

To teach is to leave something behind as we reach toward the new, a difficult process for music educators who are more willing to add than to delete, to revise rather than to abandon.

—Richard Colwell, 2001

Moving Forward

For the past twenty years our department of music has operated a highly successful early childhood music program. It is a community music school open to more than 500 children and their families. Classes are held for children from birth through age twelve and includes classes that involve: parent-baby musical interaction, toddler music, drumming, piano, marimba, Suzuki violin and cello, a graded choral program, and guitar study. The program is loved by the community and regarded as an important part of our city’s early childhood music scene. Despite the successful enrollment year after year, I was concerned about our teachers’ limited understanding of developmentally appropriate practice.

Our teachers, for the most part, were graduates of our music education program and considered master teachers in the state who held positions of respect and esteem as public school elementary music teachers. While they were competent, child-centered teachers, I observed, especially in the toddler and baby classes, teaching that seemed more like “watered down” kindergarten instruction. Over the years we were able to bring in national experts in early childhood music to work with the teachers. This certainly improved the teaching, but as our staff began to move on, we had a difficult time finding replacement teachers with the same sense of developmentally appropriate practice. I became especially concerned because recent graduates of our program were applying for openings in the community school yet had no idea how to engage toddlers and babies in a musical way appropriate to their age and abilities. I began to take this personally.

My first step in tackling this problem was to teach a graduate class in Early Childhood Learning Theories revealing a number of important gaps in our curriculum development at the school. I also began looking more closely at our Elementary General Music course wondering how I could fit in more information about early childhood. It became clear that the 16-week Elementary Methods course required for all music education majors was already crammed full with too many requirements to add in-depth coverage about something that I felt needed an entire course.

Next I was able to persuade the steering committee of the community school to hire an early childhood music specialist (Julia, above) to work with the early childhood teachers in the school as well as hold some workshops for preschool teachers in the area. That was a good beginning, but still just a bandage.

Eventually, I was able to advocate for a separate course in early childhood methods as a requirement for undergraduate vocal track majors.

It took several years of curriculum re-vamping which involved reducing the credit hours in another methods course (Choral Methods). But I’m proud to note that students in the first class of Early Childhood Methods students are now at work as student interns with the Community School and they show great promise.

We seem to be on the road to a new beginning in both our Community School and in narrowing the gap in our music education program. Our students now seem open and comfortable in considering the possibility of working in early childhood music settings. A new culture of singing is growing in our music education program and fewer and fewer students leave our program who are afraid to sing. More and more of our students express interest in working in our Community School and new directions in curriculum and teaching are starting to emerge.

Yes, a one-credit course is not nearly long enough and some may not view a course geared toward the skills of making music with very young children as “academic coursework,” but perhaps we will someday take away one credit of ensemble or applied studio to make the course longer!

A Beginning

Yet a new gap emerges. We’re noticing a shift in interest from parent-baby and toddler classes to a desire for young children to begin instruction on instruments at a very early age. Perhaps it is a cultural shift in society. Our musical culture seems to be overtaken by images of singing stars, prodigies and miniature virtuosi that overshadow the importance of play and group interaction with children and music. Is the idea of early childhood music education itself standing in a tragic gap between a culture which aspires for its children to be American idols and one in which the realities of what is appropriate for children is central?

Perhaps there are always new gaps—and that is the tension that propels us forward to stand and live and learn from the tangled inner-weavings of the gardens of our life’s work. We are as advo-

cates for Early Childhood music are always growing, examining, and changing and we continue to work on the tending of our harvest—joyful, mindful and playful musical work with children. Because it matters.

Conclusion

These authors recognize the need for more music preparation—at all levels—for those involved in early childhood. This includes the children, the undergraduate music education majors, and the preschool/childcare teachers who facilitate these musical experiences—and in their case, often with little or no training. As such, this article provides glimpses into each of these areas through our shared narratives, while providing those involved with general music in higher education some possible strategies for implementation.

Thiessen & Barrett (2002) propose that teachers are constantly “at the center of an insistent and polyphonic conversation about educational change” and note that multiple voices “have joined the chorus to call for changes in teaching practices, in the ways schools are organized, and in the relationship of teachers to the students and communities they serve” (p. 759). Our main



premise is to prompt others to continue addressing the “collective,” yet very diverse, needs of early childhood music and early childhood music makers. At the present time, early childhood music education is entering the conversation and does now have a voice at the table, but it remains yet a “small voice” on the perimeter of curricular changes in comparison to other areas of general music.

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