Challenges to Music Education: Curriculum Reconceptualized

By Betty Hanley and Janet Montgomery

What do you think about when you hear the word curriculum? External expectations, the documented curriculum, the planned curriculum, the delivered curriculum, the attained curriculum, the hidden curriculum, everything that happens in schools? There is no shortage of definitions in the literature. In their influential book, Leonhard and House wrote that curriculum involves establishing educational outcomes and selecting appropriate learning experiences to help students achieve these outcomes. In his book about contemporary music education, Mark described curriculum as teaching methods, materials, and tools. Labuta and Smith defined curriculum in three ways: as skills—what students must be able to do; as knowledge—“what students must know as a result of schooling”; and as instructional methods—Orff, Kodály, Gordon, and so on. All of these writers reflect how curriculum has generally been conceptualized in music education.

These traditional ways of thinking about curriculum deal with the mechanics of teaching and assume that the way curriculum has been understood is working for students. In this traditional view, curriculum is a linear process involving development, implementation, and evaluation; its implementation is top-down and...
**Figure 1. A Comparison of Two Curriculum Paradigms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional (Positivist) Curriculum</th>
<th>Reconceptualized Curriculum</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>Quest for understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hierarchy</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action and results</td>
<td>Inquiry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on how</td>
<td>Focus on why</td>
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<tr>
<td>Right and wrong answers</td>
<td>Multiple answers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prediction and control</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practice and theory isolated</td>
<td>Practice and theory integrated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher as implementer of someone else’s ideas</td>
<td>Teacher as decision maker and researcher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subject centered</td>
<td>Learner centered</td>
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<tr>
<td>Test driven</td>
<td>Performance driven</td>
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emphasizes policy, planning, and supervision. The curriculum has focused narrowly on classroom practice with the teacher implementing a curriculum that experts have developed. Students are at the bottom of the hierarchy. This way of thinking about curriculum is based on positivist assumptions (see figure 1). Is this view comprehensive enough? Does it meet the needs of a world that is rapidly changing, socially, economically, and culturally? Does it address recent discoveries about learning? The contributors to this special focus issue believe that it does not.

**Reflection 1: A Music Teacher Reflects on Curriculum**

I can honestly say that I never gave the generating of curriculum documents a single thought when I began teaching. The documents simply “existed.”

It wasn’t until I took a course in curriculum that I ever really thought about what curriculum really is or how it reflects the ideological foundations upon which it is built. Now that I am more aware of the fact that curriculum is more than what, or even how, we teach, I am even more concerned about who ultimately decides what should go into a curriculum document.

Now, I think I am in a confusing place where no one has all the right answers. University-level theorists and researchers have a clear role to play in leading the way down the ideological and theoretical curricular path. District-level personnel need to be able to articulate the whole picture to the school board, which ultimately makes many of the budgeting decisions. Music teachers should have lots of opportunities to pilot and respond to proposed curriculum changes. In addition, music teachers should be consulted as to “best practice” in order to help avoid throwing the baby out with the bath water. Communities and parents should be consulted as to how they see music fitting into the overall community plan. What does the community value? And finally, students are perhaps the very best sources of best-practice data. Curricular decisions without learners at the center are bound to fail. Having said that, I have absolutely no idea how such a model should look. I am stymied as to how to involve all these stakeholders in a meaningful and productive conversation that ends with an improved music curriculum for the learners in British Columbia.

—Anne Thomson, elementary music teacher, Squamish, British Columbia

**Societal Changes and Music Curriculum**

A new view of curriculum that focuses on understanding practice and experience has been emerging, and curriculum is being reconceptualized (see figure 1). The idea of a reconceptualized curriculum started gaining momentum among educators in the 1980s, but not in music education. Indeed, music education has been slow to engage in a paradigm shift that has been rocking North America. This paradigm shift, which has been called postmodernism, is evident all around us in the disintegrating borders between disciplines and countries, the questioning of Western supremacy, the need to tolerate conflicting issues and perspectives, an acceptance of ambiguity, and a questioning of authority. We can see the influence of postmodernism in our films, books, art, and music, even though its definition is elusive. Indeed, “postmodernism rejects any effort to provide a single unified explanation of anything.” It has become woven into the very fabric of our lives. As society changes, postmodernism is confronting and challenging music education and the role of music teachers in North American society.

Postmodernism is evident in a number of questions related to music education. Should music education be teacher centered, subject centered, or learner centered? Should we focus on skill development or the development of musical understanding? Should we emphasize musical learning or cross-curriculum connections? Should we be trying to improve our students’ musical tastes or welcoming the diverse kinds of music relevant in their lives? Whose interests should guide decision making? What is really going on in schools?

Increasingly, thinkers in music education are rejecting past practice as outdated in view of current knowledge about learning and irrelevant to contemporary children and youth. In critically examining music education as it is traditionally practiced, Regelski, for example, writes about the need to reject “methodolatry” and “taken-for-granted recipes” and avoid working
Reflection 2: A Music Teacher Reflects on Change

Even the small changes I made in my classroom indicated that constructivist practices do lead to more active, responsible learners who are able to achieve greater musical understandings. Students valued the opportunity to work collaboratively with their peers. Furthermore, this collaboration, and the shared learning that arose from it, created a desire in my students to become more actively involved in their own learning and work to the best of their ability. I learned that the teacher in the constructivist classroom must carefully monitor the amount of curricular material to cover because students require much more time to work collaboratively, access prior knowledge, reflect on and revise old and new ideas, and demonstrate their understandings in diverse ways.

—Catherine Bayley, elementary Orff music teacher, Delta, British Columbia

Reflection 3: A Music Teacher Reflects on Political and Cultural Issues

When I first began teaching twelve years ago, I was almost hyperaware of the need to be inclusive and culturally unbiased. I went out of my way to include music from “other” cultures and steer away from Christian-based musical selections. For example, at Christmas time, I would call my concerts “Winter Celebrations,” and I would not include any pieces that directly referenced the Christian celebration. Then I became aware that I was neglecting many wonderful musical works simply because they might represent a “majority” view. I slowly began to choose musical works based on specific musical elements that I deemed appropriate for our current program of study. In retrospect, I think what actually changed was my criteria for inclusion: the focus switched from a political or socially based set of criteria to a more academic, elemental basis for selection. Now I am somewhere in between. The bottom line for including a piece of music or body of musical work in my classroom curriculum is that I must have firsthand, authentic, contextual, cultural, and historical information about the piece. I will no longer include a song from Nigeria or a sacred oratorio by Handel without knowing (from what I deem to be a reliable source) how that piece fits into the cultural and historical fabric of the society where it originated. I still fear being guilty of appropriation or exclusion, but at least I am more consciously aware of the criteria I use to choose music in my classroom.

—Anne Thomson, elementary music teacher, Squamish, British Columbia

Janet Barrett begins this special focus issue by questioning our traditional ways of thinking about curriculum in music and providing a framework for approaching music education from a reconceptualized perspective. In the next article, also addressing curriculum and school practice, Lucy Green examines the gap between in-school and out-of-school music experiences in a study of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds’ responses to constructivist-type classroom experiences. She...
Suggested Reading


MENC Resources

The following MENC publications offer more information about music curriculum. For more information, visit www.menc.org or call 1-800-336-3768.


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