Chapter 8

Critical Pedagogy and Children’s Musical Flow: Curriculum Design and Assessment

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the authors’ application of critical pedagogy constructs during Japanese children’s violin learning. Designing and implementing the Instructional Organizer (IO) for critical practice and adapting Custodero’s (1998, 2005) flow studies in children’s musical activities forms the conceptual framework of the study. A Japanese violin teacher, one of the researchers of this study, applied the IO in a Japanese public school’s afterschool program to construct community violin classes. In contrast, the same teacher taught group violin classes in a traditional manner at another public school. Lesson videos and field notes enabled the authors to narratively describe children’s flow experiences. Findings suggest that multiple flow experiences were identified in the community classes. In contrast, the flow was often stifled in the traditional group classes. The IO template was very useful in aiding the teacher in creating rich pedagogical spaces where community group students were able to exhibit hallmarks of “flow.”

INTRODUCTION

Critiques of education often describe classrooms, teacher and student interactions, as well as curriculum matter as totalitarian, obsessed with authority, punctuality, classroom civility, and discipline (Giroux, 1983; Giroux, 2003; Giroux, 2009; McLaren, 2003). High stakes assessments associated with contemporary school reforms also generate the types of classroom described in the critical literature (Hutchison and Wiggan, 2009).

A classroom setting seemingly outside the deadening pedagogy described by critical theorists, however, might be the found in the arts. The arts classroom can enliven children’s spirits and offer opportunities for physical movement beyond
the cognitive and kinesthetically oppressive classroom environments described in critical theory. Arts education fits well with the progressive educational idea of a “pedagogy of autonomy,” which pays serious attention to students’ “experiences that respect freedom” (Freire, 1998). Indeed, the arts are “a way of undertaking the world’s lyrical spaces to test one’s freedom and question plain sense” (Allsup in Greene, 2009). However, students in arts classrooms often do not realize the exhilarating sense of freedom described by Allsup (Sullivan, 2012; Gude, 2012).

Despite inherent opportunities for arts education to relieve students from deadening classroom environments, “traditional” music instruction can also deaden student interest and contribute to their continuing oppression. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) writes, “even when children are taught music, the usual problem often arises: too much emphasis is placed on their performance, and too little on their experience.” Woodford (2005) notes that many music teachers are notoriously conservative because “many of them are intellectually passive.” They are accepting of received knowledge, including highly prescriptive methods and the latest pedagogical fads. Lamb (2009) notes that critical pedagogy has had more impact in general education than in music education.

Our application of the Instructional Organizer (IO) for enlivening arts instruction offers opportunities to move critical theory into critical practice. We developed the IO as an instructional template for teacher use in planning and delivering instruction. One objective of the study was to assess the effects of the instructional tool known as the IO on teacher behavior during music education.

We applied the theoretical construct of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) to assess Japanese children’s flow experiences during instruction. Flow is an optimal state in which people are so involved in an activity that they experience genuine satisfaction. Children’s flow during music instruction is seen more often when they are attracted to, and are intentionally and actively engaged with musical sound, materials, and other musicians (Custodero, 1998 & 2005).

This study attempts to test the feasibility of applying critical pedagogy constructs found in the IO to music education. Specifically we investigated Japanese children’s flow experience in two after-school violin learning settings: (a) a traditionally taught after-school group violin class, and (b) a site using IO to implement a democratically inspired curriculum (community site).

BACKGROUND

Critical Pedagogy in Practice

Creating a classroom learning experience where teachers recognize and eliminate issues raised by critical theorists is challenging. The need to make classrooms democratic is laudable and as critical theorists suggest, absolutely necessary. From a practical perspective, the very real concern exists of creating equity and excellence during daily teaching and learning activities if the teacher wishes to raise student critical consciousness. How do teachers translate critical theory into teaching and learning practices? Developing teaching practices faithful to core critical constructs such as equity, student voice, democracy, and academic success are necessary. As Giroux notes:

(T)eachers need to learn how to create an affirmative and critical continuity between how students view the world and those forms of analyses that provide the basis for both analyzing and enriching such perspectives (Giroux, 2009).

The IO was developed out of this call by Giroux for teachers to create affirmative continuity between student experience and instructional practices. There are seven elements of the IO that assist teachers in incorporating critical practice during teaching and learning that we will discuss.