

Abstract

I examine specific critical areas to be explored within the U.S. Music Education curriculum, proposing how bell hooks's themes of critical, engaged pedagogy can effectively influence critical Music Education. I then provide overviews of bell hooks's critical approach in education, and three interrelated concepts within critical pedagogy that expound upon this approach. Subsequently, I connect how bell hooks's approach to education can exist and function through current research and applied practices found within the literature of Critical Pedagogy and Music Education.

Teaching Music to Transgress: A Theme and Variations on bell hooks
(Music Education as a Practice of Freedom)

Introduction

Music exerts a powerful influence within our world and society. When experienced authentically, it has the capacity to transgress boundaries that can often alienate students, such as race, class, or gender. Within modern music education in the U.S., there exists hidden, null, and explicit curriculums that invite revitalization. The hidden curriculum within modern, formal school music education at the elementary and high school levels appears to focus attention and efforts to ensemble performance and a “banking system” approach (Freire, 1972) to general music pedagogy, merely for its aesthetic value and “arts requirement” when observed superficially. This tradition of utilizing Music Education primarily for its aesthetic value has unintentionally served as an instrument of alienation that disregards the inherent purpose within the practices of school music as a fulfilling art (Schmidt, 2005). Furthermore, there are oppressive, hegemonic structures that exist within the Music Education curriculum, namely in the areas of democratic education, multiculturalism, and sexism/identity.

A progressive, reflective approach can prove to be the answer, specifically through the proposed vision of thoughtful, engaged critical pedagogy from American academic and author bell hooks. This proposed revitalization invites an increased emphasis on developing the creative expression and critical reflection abilities of students to create an inclusive, diverse, multicultural Music classroom dedicated to the practice of freedom for all students (hooks, 1994). The primary focus of this article is transfixed on the assertion that thoughtful, engaged critical pedagogy within Music Education has the power to transgress boundaries of marginalization, oppression, racism, and injustice as bell hooks believes what education as a practice of freedom could be. Research provided in this article will include affective and academic sources that draw from the disciplines of Music Education and Critical Pedagogy, namely bell hooks and related

researchers. This article will identify three areas to be critically explored within Music Education, being Democratic Education, Multicultural Pedagogy, and Advocacy for Feminism and Diverse Identities. Subsequently, this article will explore how bell hooks's themes of critical, engaged pedagogy can effectively function within the music classroom, specifically within these three areas.

Theme: Education as a Practice of Freedom

bell hooks's view of education, as stated in her book *Teaching to Transgress*, is the practice of freedom in which anyone can learn, teaching in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of all students (hooks, 1994, p.13). hooks additionally contributes that education is a transgressive approach across racial, class, and sexual boundaries that advocates for students to think critically within the learning environment (Osman & Akella, 2015). As further detailed in *Teaching to Transgress*, when education is the practice of freedom, both teachers and students are empowered to grow, share, and confess as learners through holistic models of engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994, p.21). hooks later augments this notion of progressive education in *Teaching Community* (2003) as enabling individuals to learn how to confront feelings of loss, restore a sense of connection, and create community in order to make the classroom a space that is both life-sustaining and mind-expanding for both teacher and student to work together with liberating mutuality.

hooks upholds a vision of the classroom as a democratic space (hooks, 1994, p. 177) where learning promotes equity, transgressing against the oppressive dynamics of the banking system of education (Freire, 1972). Through her framework of critical pedagogy, hooks seeks to “spread critical awareness, develop enlightened witnesses, and eventually transform culture”

(Biana, p. 14, 2020). In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks urges both educators and students to critically engage in transgressive resistance to co-construct a holistic, ethical, and transformative learning environment which values all voices (Hess, 2017b). Overall, the visionary work and efforts of hooks helps to construct and compose the overall transformative theme of “Education as a practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994; Hess, 2017).

I will relate this main “theme” in relation to the concepts of “theme and variations” within music composition and theory, which is “a standard form of musical composition consisting of a simple usually harmonized melody presented first in its original unadorned form then repeated several or many times with varied treatment so based on the theme that at least some semblance of its general melodic or harmonic form is evident” (Merriam-Webster). I will expound upon this main theme of “Education as a practice of freedom” through three “variations” that relate to the main theme, which are: Democratic Education, Multicultural Pedagogy, and Advocacy for Feminism and Diverse Identities.

Variation I: Democratic Education

Within this theme, further variations of bell hooks’s philosophy pertaining to education can be explored and analyzed. A variation deriving from this theme is the practice of democratic education. Dewey (1903) describes democracy as freeing intelligence for independent effectiveness, where the mind can be emancipated to independently function liberally. Democratic education, as hooks (2010) details in *Teaching critical thinking*, is based on the assumption that democracy can work, wherein it is the foundation of all genuine teaching and learning. In establishing a practice of democratic education, a dialogical method, or dialogue, “is necessary for education to create interaction between teachers and students and between students

and other students” (Muhammad et al., 2019). Creating dialogical experiences, as Freire (1972) accounts in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, requires critical thinking, and “without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.” Thus, a dialogue in the classroom is a two-way communication where both students and teacher actively take a part in the educational process, encouraging mutual dialogue, deliberation, and question posing (Muhammad et al., 2019; Giroux, 2004).

Dialogue, as hooks (1994) describes in *Teaching to Transgress*, is one of the simplest ways educators and critical thinkers can cross boundaries across race, gender, class, or professional standing. As hooks (2003) describes in *Teaching Community*, dialogue for the democratic educator is a vital pedagogic element that allows for a classroom community to “open up” and share with each other, where the educator is not utilizing hegemonic practices to enforce and dictate a learning environment. Additionally, hooks states that democratic education is never confined solely within an institutionalized classroom. Through a lens of critical pedagogy and reciprocal discourse between teacher and student, democratic education invites students to identify and deliberate on power relations, while also cultivating their capacity for critical judgment and expanding democratic relations (Giroux, 2004).

The first variation shall be revisited through the lens of Music Education, which is the concept of democratic education. Abrahams (2005a) offers examples for how critical pedagogues within Music Education can encourage students to gain the courage to grow in their learning by practicing their expression of freedom and creativity, thus yielding a critically transformative experience (Schmidt, 2005). Abrahams offers a General Elementary Music class lesson where students are asked to illustrate a portrait of their family members. They are then asked to share within small groups who their family members are, and are next posed with the challenge of

choosing what music would be planned to be played for their family party. The students are to critically explain and justify why their selection of music would fit their family party.

A next lesson related to the theme of “family” would invite older (middle school or high school) students from an orchestra to perform and demonstrate their instruments, explaining that each instrument belongs to a family, just like their own. The children then collaboratively work to think and categorize the instruments into what their appropriate families are. A final activity includes having the younger students create their own homemade instruments using everyday materials (boxes, rubberbands, tubes), categorizing their created instruments into what family they think they belong to, and then performing together with the older students using their created instruments. Throughout this lesson, the instructor serves to facilitate a democratic learning environment for students to make discoveries for themselves, while also giving opportunities for creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking (Abrahams, 2005a).

Variation II: Multicultural Pedagogy

Another variation is the practice of multicultural pedagogy. Elliott (1989) denotes ‘multicultural’ as exhibiting a shared belief in freedom of association, competing ways of life, and the preservation of differences. Regarding the task of creating an effective multicultural pedagogy, bell hooks encourages students to be polyvocal and polyphonic: to stay true and keep their identity and culture (Olson, 1994). Multiculturalism in education can compel educators to recognize any narrow confines with how knowledge is created, shaped, and shared in the classroom (hooks, p. 44, 1994). As hooks states in *Teaching to Transgress*, cultural diversity can inform all aspects of learning, where all cultures and identities are welcomed, where no dominant culture is hegemonically enforced. Regarding ethnic pride, hooks advocates that loving one’s

blackness (or any skin color) develops a self-esteem of love instead of the colonized viewpoint of feeling inferior (hooks, 1995).

Within *bell hooks and the Politics of Literacy: A Conversation*, Olson (1994) details this concept further while conversing with hooks herself. hooks motivated students at Yale to keep their identity and culture by allowing them to write their papers “in black vernacular, in Spanish, in whatever they wanted to, as long as they did that same paper in standard English and followed the required format.” hooks recognized that it may be disempowering for her to not encourage her students to acquire the skills of knowing and writing that would help them succeed in current society as a whole. However, bell hooks believed that it was possible to simultaneously acquire these skills while still honoring and cherishing other forms of speaking and writing, so that students were not forced to leave the other behind (Olson, 1994). hooks advocated for students to transgress the established norms of Western, higher education-level writing in order to allow them the freedom to express themselves in their writing in ways that felt most natural to them, keeping true to their cultural identities in regards to their language and writing. Within this vision of multicultural pedagogy, hooks herself demonstrated that educators “must be actively involved and committed to the process of self actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (Osman & Akella, 2015).

Juliet Hess (2017a) exhibits the practice of multicultural education, the second variation, in her article *Equity in Music Education* explores possibilities of culturally responsive teaching within the music classroom. Hess seeks to engage students’ own music interests and experiences in the classroom, validating that their perspectives and own forms and expression of music are valued and valuable. Hess offers imaginative approaches to both formal and informal practices of music learning, such as “producing hip-hop tracks, playing in drum circles, or performing in

mariachi bands.” Hess acknowledges the established importance of traditional music education pedagogy, such as written notation and aural learning, but critically examines the contextual values of these skills outside of the classroom and rehearsal space.

Hess questions how music programs that inherently focus on these skills may place limitations for students whose predominant choice of music-making might be more left-field compared to traditional practices, such as hip-hop production or mariachi bands. Hess advocates the historical and cultural importance of music relevant to specific communities, believing that by providing quality socio historical context for the diverse music studied, educators can model ways in which students can authentically connect musical practices to their own personally lived experiences. Through this contextualization, students can learn to critically think and reflect about how music exists within society, such as the questioning of who may be absent from repertoire that is taught and explored in traditional music classes (Hess, 2017a).

Variation III: Advocacy for feminism and Diverse Identities

A third variation is the advocacy of feminism and diverse identities (LGBTQ) within education. hooks has covered the ideology of feminism extensively within relation to various domains, such as Black women in society, as covered in *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. As quoted by bell hooks herself, “Visionary feminism is a wise and loving politics. It is rooted in the love of male and female being, refusing to privilege one over the other.” Much of her efforts focus upon advocating for the cultural concerns of African American women and women of color within the predominantly white feminist movement (Osman & Akella, 2015). bell hooks declares that feminist perspectives within the classroom setting have the power to

affirm the vitality of critical thinking by the connection of education and social justice (hooks, 2010).

hooks's viewpoint on feminism can further broadened/augmented to include sexual politics and issues of sexuality and sexual orientation, as bell hooks is one of the earliest African American scholars to address and critique the issue of homophobia within Black culture (Valdivia, 2002). hooks demonstrates this willingness to address the topic of homosexuality within education in *Teaching Community* (2003), where she recalls a seminar regarding the work of African-American novelist James Baldwin. hooks observed how the majority of students in the seminar were shocked to learn he was gay and openly expressed homophobic remarks, exhibiting how their heterosexist thinking blinded them from even considering that any queer students might be in class with them. hooks addressed this shock by working to establish a learning community of loving kindness for all identities, urging the class community to confront the difference between hate speech and stating opinions. As can be discerned from Valdivia (2002) and Osman & Akella (2015), hooks proposes a radical change and/or eradication of present patriarchal systems, aiming to create revised or completely new ethical theories built upon a new paradigm of morality that is capable of delivering popular culture from persistently racist, sexist, homophobic, imperialist, and classist normative ideals.

Jasmine Hines (2020) offers an intersectional musical approach of promoting Black feminism through the music of Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe. Hines's approach aligns quite closely with bell hooks's own work regarding Black feminism. Hines endorses intersectionality, which is a method of comprehending existing social paradigms that construct unique human experiences, in association with Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as a means to disrupt the hegemonic and Eurocentric norm of Music Education curriculum. This offers a valuable

opportunity for Black girls and female students of color to connect with musicians that more closely resemble and relate to themselves, finding solidarity and understanding through shared stories, experiences, and ideas through the lyrics and songs of Black female musicians. Hines specifically conceptualizes how the intersectional musicality of both Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe, as informed by the framework of BFT, can communicate the experiences of what Black girls are facing within modern day society (Hines, 2020).

Both Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe serve as relevant examples on the lived realities of Black women, their music collectively encompassing past and present eras. Simone, representing the older era, expressed the lived realities of Black women from her era, specifically the topics of racism, sexism, sexual discrimination, and classism in society. Songs like ‘To Be Young, Gifted, and Black’ and ‘Four Women’ convey themes of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, and slavery of African Americans. Janelle Monáe, a Black queer woman from an economically poor background, makes music that is reflective of her personal experiences, also critiquing the systematic structures that Black women exist within. Her song ‘Hell You Talmbout’ serves as a protest against the wrongful killings of African Americans (many female) by racial violence and/or law enforcement. Her song ‘Q.U.E.E.N.’, which stands for Queer, Untouchables, Emigrants, Excommunicated, and Negroid, is focused on the empowerment of oppressed identities. Both feminist musicians uphold the duty and responsibility of reflecting on the sociocultural and sociopolitical times through their musical expression. Within the music classroom, the analysis of their lyrics can offer a perspective on what it means to perform, write, and exist as a Black woman in music and society. Their music accomplishes the act of naming, which bell hooks has emphasized is the power to identify and speak to larger societal issues of

domination and difference. Overall, study of their music has the power to affirm minoritized students of diverse backgrounds, specifically feminists and LGBTQ identities..

Synthesis & Conclusions

bell hooks suggests an approach to combat oppression through the development of critical consciousness, which through a process of critical examination, is a starting point to interrogate sex, race, and class factors in order to gain self empowerment to overthrow systems of domination through a paradigm shift (Biana, 2020; Osman & Akella, 2015). hooks's main theme of "Education as a Practice of Freedom" stands as a central principle for the integration of Critical Pedagogy into Music Education, through which the variations of Democratic Education, Multicultural Pedagogy, and Advocacy for Feminism and Diverse Identities can effectively enact transformational change. Each variation requires non-alienating teaching through a critically conscious discourse, where personal meaning, interpretation, and social-cultural understanding can connect the experiences that students and teachers bring to the classroom (Schmidt, 2005). This critically engaged approach can develop students' abilities to distinguish and appreciate the differences and similarities among musical cultures, adopting a stance of 'multimusicality' (Elliott, 1989), which can likewise carry over into a transformational experience when the new word, that is music, is created with and within the outside world (Abrahams, 2005b; Schmidt, 2005). For critical pedagogues in Music Education, their teaching serves to enable students to develop musicality and also affect change both in and outside the classroom (Abrahams, 2005b).

While multiple examples of Critical approaches to Music Education have been conducted and reported, there are limitations regarding the specific interconnectedness with bell hooks's teachings. The covered literature in this review is able to bridge the main themes together, with

Abrahams and Hines aligning the most naturally with bell hooks. The lack of direct synthesis between bell hooks and Music Education can prove to be an area of potential further research towards the progression of Critical Music Education. The three-sided approach of bell hooks presented in this Literature Review can provide a defined framework to base Critical Music Education off of. Further efforts can include developing a curricular framework within Music Education that aligns with the main theme and three variations of bell hooks, with lessons covering critical topics, and teaching and learning being practiced within a democratic, multicultural, feminist, and pro-LGBTQ environment.

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