

No Student Clef Behind

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Abstract

Music educators embody educational theories through their teaching practices be it intentional or not. By recognizing and examining the instances in which music teachers apply theories in their classrooms, significant insights can be gained towards more effective pedagogy. This paper considers real-life examples of how educational theories manifest in the practices of some elementary and middle school music teachers in Colorado Springs, CO. The first section of the paper will detail the classroom observations that I conducted within three music classrooms located in Colorado Springs District 11. In the second section of this paper, I will introduce some educational theories and analyze specific instances in which the teachers I observed incorporated them into their teaching practices. The final section of this paper serves as a space to reflect on the process of completing this thesis while summarizing the most valuable insights that I gained.

Introduction

This paper is a summary of the entirety of my capstone project, which takes an in depth look at praxis within kindergarten through eighth grade music classrooms in Colorado Springs. Praxis can be defined as “the practical application of a theory” (Merriam-Webster, 2024) and in the context of my capstone, refers to the ways in which music teachers incorporate educational theories in their teaching practices. Because educational theories are not confined solely to the realm of education, some of the theories introduced in this paper will span across disciplines such as psychology and human development to name a few.

As an aspiring teacher, I was motivated to witness in real-time how music education spaces operate, and the degree to which teachers embody theory in their techniques. The intention behind this was to inform my current and future pedagogical approach through

observing teachers in action. Having had little exposure to formal music education in my elementary and middle school years, I began my capstone project with a fascination for how these spaces function and operate. Knowing that I wanted to become a teacher after graduating from Colorado College, I chose to focus on the roles of teachers in their classrooms for my capstone project. Furthermore, I wanted to have a chance to apply the theories I learned during my undergraduate experience in a creative fashion. As a result, I formulated my capstone project in a way that reflects my educational aspirations and personal passions.

Section 1 - Classroom Observations

The first section of this paper focuses on my experiences observing music classrooms in Colorado Springs. I will begin this section by detailing the process of establishing contact with music teachers to observe their classrooms. Next, I will briefly recount the procedure of completing Institutional Review Board (IRB) exemptions to ensure ethical conduct during and after my observations. Following this, I will consider my positionality as an observer and discuss some of the ways in which my presence in these classrooms may have affected the findings from my observations. Finally, I will provide a quick summary of the classrooms that I observed, focusing specifically on classroom culture, teaching techniques, student engagement, and general events that stood out to me.

Before my classroom observations began, I spent hours searching the internet attempting to locate the contact information of music teachers in Colorado Springs. After all, in order to observe music classrooms I needed to get in contact with teachers that would welcome me into their respective schools. At this point, I had yet to narrow down the age range of students I wanted to observe, as I was interested in the entirety of kindergarten through 12th grade music

education. I knew that I would eventually have to narrow the scope of my project, but I could not make the decision until I knew which classrooms I could observe. After compiling a list of K-12 music teachers to reach out to, I met with Jennifer Wakeen, the field placement coordinator at Colorado College. With her help, I decided to limit the scope of my potential classroom observation sites to include only those schools that exist within District 11, the public school district most closely connected to Colorado College. District 11 (D11) schools are not only in close proximity to the Colorado College campus, but are also where many students complete observations. Besides this, the decision to limit my observations to schools within D11 was made because I had already completed the background check and fingerprinting required to observe D11 classrooms. These security measures were completed for previous observations I had conducted in D11 as part of education classes at Colorado College. Had I wanted to observe schools in other districts, it was likely that I would have needed to go through additional background checks and fingerprinting. Knowing this, Jennifer Wakeen and I compiled a list of music teachers in D11 with the help of an old syllabus from Joyce Hanagan's "MU218: Elementary Music Practicum" course that I took in 2022. With my hefty list of D11 teachers and the necessary security clearance, Jennifer and I introduced ourselves to the teachers via email, and briefly explained to them the project I was hoping to conduct. We received replies from a handful of teachers, and selected the first three teachers who gave me permission to observe their classrooms to participate in this capstone project.

Before I could observe any of the classrooms, I still needed to complete the Institutional Review Board (IRB) exemption process. The Institutional Review Board reviews all research that involves human participants before the research occurs, to protect the welfare, privacy, and rights of those who participate. The IRB can grant exemptions for research that fits within an

exemption category such as education, and involves minimal risk. As I planned to conduct my observations in classrooms and interact with teachers to inform my research, I was required to submit both an educational exemption and an interaction exemption. Completing these exemptions included creating consent forms for teachers and separate consent forms for students.

It is important to note that the IRB regulations limited the scope of my observations in that I was not permitted to take photos or videos in the classrooms that I observed. This rendered the observations I collected more susceptible to my subjectivity as an individual observer. In other words, my observations were in some ways influenced by my own cultural subjectivity and disposition. Had I been able to take videos during my time in the classrooms, my observations might have been more objective. In addition to this, I would have been able to re-watch my observations for additional insights. Even though I received the necessary IRB exemptions necessary to conduct my research, I still wanted to take the necessary precautions to protect the identities of the teachers and students that I observed. As a result, I have abbreviated the names of the teachers I observed and omitted the names of the schools in which I conducted my observations.

Before I begin to recount my time in classrooms, I would like to consider the ways in which my presence as an observer may have influenced the ways in which the teachers and students I observed reacted or behaved differently in response to my presence. This is what is known as acknowledging subject reactivity. In general, academic studies regarding subject reactivity have shown that reactivity is not well understood or ubiquitous (Weinrott et al., 1978). With this in mind, it is difficult to discern the ways in which my presence affected the behavior of the students and teachers that I observed. Being vigilant of the notion of subject reactivity, however, provided me with another lens to process my observations. For example, one student

that I observed seemed to be consistently distracted by my presence in the classroom, which resulted in their teacher attempting to redirect them. Instances like these helped me realize that considering subject reactivity is crucial to conducting classroom observations effectively.

Observation Set 1

The first set of observations I conducted was with Ms. V and her middle school choral classes. Throughout the time spent in her classroom, I noticed that she was very calm, routine oriented, and intentional with her teaching practices. In addition to this, she was stern and deliberate when redirecting students. Her classroom was arranged with chairs facing towards the whiteboard, an electric keyboard, and her desk. Ms. V's choral classes were composed of students from different grade levels with varying levels of years spent in formal music education settings.

Ms. V followed a general routine with each of her classes during the time I conducted my observations. She stood by the door as students entered the classroom and greeted each one of them. After students settled into their seats, they were expected to complete a brief warm-up activity on their school laptops. These warm-up activities served as a way for Ms. V to receive feedback from her students and typically posed questions such as, "Which songs would you like to practice more before our upcoming winter concert?" Ms. V checked her computer as the answers trickled in and reminded the students who had not yet completed the warm-up to do so. After all the warm-ups were completed, Ms. V led a physical warm-up for the students, such as a body percussion call and response game or a vocal warm-up. Students were then directed to grab folders from the front of the classroom which contained their vocal music ("Concert Etiquette Song," "Let it Snow," "Dona Nobis Pacem," and songs from *Willy Wonka Jr.*).

Most of the class period was dedicated to rehearsing for the students' upcoming musical and winter concert. Ms. V had a variety of strategies for practicing the songs with her students. At times, Ms. V would play the songs on her keyboard and have students sing along while following her lead. Other times, she would have the students sing along without a musical accompaniment such as her keyboard or a backing track. With regard to the preparation for the musical, *Willy Wonka Jr.*, Ms. V would play a recording of the backing track for each one of the songs, while simultaneously walking around the room. Ms. V was very intentional with her movement while walking around the room, as she spent more time in areas where students were having difficulty singing the songs correctly. In addition to this, she would move towards students who seemed to be off task, not participating, or fooling around with their neighbors as a method of refocusing her students. In addition to this, Ms. V was intentional with her body language and position when speaking with students. In other instances of redirection, she would gently crouch down to the level of her students and speak in a soft voice to attempt to get students to refrain from disrupting the class. In addition to this, she would perform a similar maneuver when giving students congratulations or having personal conversations with them.

Observation Set 2

The second set of observations I conducted was with Ms. L and her general elementary music classes. During my time in her classroom, I noticed that Ms. L was energetic, detail oriented, caring, and rigorous. In addition to this, she maintained a professional disposition within her safe and predictable classroom. Her desk was located at the back of the classroom facing towards the board. One side of the classroom was laden with various instruments; drums, xylophones, and other large instruments were neatly organized. On the other side of the

classroom existed an upright acoustic piano and organizers for various classroom supplies. After kindergarten, music classes were grouped across grade levels with lower elementary (grades 1-3) and upper elementary (grades 4-5) each having their own dedicated classes.

The classroom routines and procedures looked different depending on which age range Ms. L was teaching. With her kindergarten and lower elementary classes, Ms. L quietly led a line of students into her classroom. Ms. L led the line to circle the room until she directed her students to stop and then sit down on the floor. Following this, Ms. L completed vocal warm-ups with her students before continuing with the material for the day. The class content focused heavily on group singing and collaborative movement exercises. Ms. L directed the students with respect to the song they were singing and it appeared that the majority of the students knew each of the songs confidently. While teaching, she used a number of techniques such as “call and response” and Solfège to support the class when it seemed as if they needed extra practice with a song or phrase. The songs consisted of a variety of folk songs from around the world, and Ms. L used a physical map to point out the different countries from where each song originated. In addition to this, she told stories about the origins of each of the songs and the contexts in which they are sung. The majority of the songs had movement routines attached. For example, while singing an Old English song, students joined hands and moved clockwise in a circle during the verse and then broke off into partners during the chorus.

Ms. L paid careful attention to the behaviors of her students during these movement exercises. She was strict, yet caring when it came to managing her classroom. She prefaced each activity with warnings and cautions towards her students and did not hesitate to remind students of her expectations when she felt as if they were not met. When a student deviated from the expectations, Ms. L would first gently remind them and re-state the expectations. Upon repeated

infringements, however, Ms. L would separate students from the rest of the class by sending them to wait in the corner of the room for a few minutes. In these instances, she asked the separated student, “Are you ready to join us again?” The student had to give a confident, verbal response of “yes” before they could rejoin the group.

In her upper elementary classes, Ms. L’s students entered the classroom on their own terms and took out their respective instruments. The upper elementary classes were instrumental music classes and were separated into three separate periods: brass and percussion, woodwinds, and string instruments. Ms. L expected her students to collectively lead themselves in warm-up exercises that were in their music books. After the warm-up exercises were complete, Ms. L guided her students through exercises and helped students on an individual basis. For example, when she noticed that a student was consistently making mistakes while playing, she would stand by the student and give them feedback and recommendations. The majority of class time was dedicated to rehearsing songs in the students’ music books. One student would count everyone in and Ms. L would step in as a metronome if the students were having trouble keeping time.

Observation Set 3

The final set of observations that I conducted were with Mr. D and his middle school concert band classes. Throughout my time spent in his classroom, I noticed that Mr. D was personable, comedic, determined, and incredibly caring. Furthermore, he consistently went out of his way to develop positive relationships with each one of his students. His large classroom was arranged with terraced seating that faced towards the front of the room. A wooden podium stood firmly as the focal point of the classroom, where Mr. D stood for the majority of his classes.

Concert band instruments and their cases rested in instrument lockers lining the interior walls of the classroom. The class periods were arranged by experience level rather than grade level, with beginner, intermediate, and advanced band classes.

From my observations, I gathered that Mr. D encouraged his students to follow a similar protocol in class every day. When the students entered the room, they sat down in their seats, which were organized by the instrument each one of them played. Following this, students prepared their instruments and placed their sheet music on their music stands. During this set up time, many students engaged in casual conversation with Mr. D, who provided support to students whose instruments were malfunctioning. Each class began with a group sharing of “Good things” in which Mr. D asked his students to share good things going on in their lives with the rest of the class. The amount of students who shared varied on the class period and Mr. D frequently asked follow up questions to get his students to share more information. Following this, Mr. D directed his students to tune their instruments to prepare playing.

The music played by the concert bands varied depending on the class. The songs were selected by the students with considerations made for difficulty level. In the beginner classes, Mr. D spent more time focusing on developing playing techniques with his students as opposed to rehearsing. He had a trumpet and trombone nearby his podium and would frequently play along with his students while rehearsing. In addition to this, he would sometimes play a melody for students to listen to. When not playing, Mr. D conducted the students in a way that was easy for them to follow while maintaining the standards of conducting. Although his conducting style was in some ways non-traditional, such as stomping his foot on the floor to communicate tempo, his students seemed to be very receptive to his style. At times, Mr. D audio recorded his students

playing and then played the recording back to them, asking his students to listen critically and formulate feedback for themselves.

Section 2 - Praxis in Music Classrooms

In this section of the paper, I will investigate the ways in which the three teachers I observed embodied educational theories through their teaching practices. I will begin by introducing these theories and follow this by recounting particular practices that I observed in which the teaching practices and methods mirrored these theories. The purpose of this analysis is to make visible the ways in which these teachers have incorporated theories into their teaching practices, either intentionally or unintentionally, to strengthen their pedagogy.

Ms. V – Proxemics

Proxemics is defined as, “the study or interpretation of physical proximity between people in various situations; the ways in which people interact spatially” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). When understanding how proxemics function within a classroom, we can look at the physical distance between the teacher and their students during different situations. Since the teacher is most responsible for creating the classroom environment, their movement in relation to students has the most influence on how proxemics manifest within the classroom. In general, teachers should move around the classroom and avoid standing/sitting in one location that indicates their authority (behind a podium, desk, or piano). In learning how to navigate the space of the classroom, teachers can become more effective at classroom management.

Ms. V was very adept at navigating throughout her classroom to influence the behavior of her students and the atmosphere of the room as a whole. During vocal rehearsal, she slowly

walked around the classroom and sang with her students in an effort to get all of the students to participate. When she noticed that a student or group of students were not singing, she would spend more time in their area. For the most part, when Ms. V passed by students, they would begin to sing or sing louder, although a few students began to sing more quietly. In addition to this, Ms. V also approached students and squatted next to them when having one-on-one conversations with them. These conversations ranged from asking students questions to getting students to refocus their attention in the class. Through her awareness of her own body and presence in the music classroom, Ms. V was able to effectively redirect attention and better manage her classroom.

Ms. L – Kinesics

Kinesics investigates how body movements and gestures serve as a form of nonverbal communication. Educators should be aware of what their body language and gestures communicate to their students as it is estimated that 75% of classroom management done by teachers is nonverbal (Balzer, 1969). That said, teachers can become more effective at managing their classrooms if they become more aware of their gestures and body language. One way that teachers can improve their classroom environment is by minimizing the amount of aggressive gestures they use. (Battersby, 2009). Gestures such as snapping fingers or pointing at a student can create a punitive and hostile environment that negatively impacts the classroom atmosphere. Within music classrooms, teachers commonly use nonverbal gestures as a tool to help direct the flow of a lesson or exercise.

Ms. L used Solfège hand symbols (do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti) in her kindergarten and lower elementary classes to redirect her students towards singing within the correct key. The Solfège

hand signs are a standardized set of seven symbols where each symbol represents a note in a movable diatonic scale. Ms. L referenced the Solfège hand signs when she noticed that her students were having difficulty singing in the correct key of the song. She gestured the “do” hand sign (tonic) and sang the tonic note to her students. Then, using her hand and without signing, she ascended diatonically through the Solfège symbols while her students sang the notes that corresponded to her gestures. In this example, Ms. L’s use of nonverbal communication served to help reinforce the key of the song sung by her students.

It is important to recognize, however, that gestures, body movement, and body language do not have universal meanings across cultures and traditions. Culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally sustaining teaching practices remind educators to recognize the ways in which their students’ positionalities shape the ways that they behave and respond to stimuli within the classroom. For example, we can consider the values that surround eye-contact behaviors across cultures. Although maintaining eye contact is positively regarded with Western European cultures, it is considered a sign of disrespect within many East Asian cultures (Argyle and Cook, 1976). Another common example of this is the significance of the thumbs up gesture. Within United States culture, the thumbs up is regarded as an expression of positivity or goodness, while in Australia and Nigeria the thumbs up gesture is considered as incredibly rude (Battersby, 2009). Because body language and gestures occupy different definitions across cultures, teachers should respond to what may seem like disrespectful behavior in response to stimuli with a spirit of inquiry and understanding.

Ms. L – Music Learning Theory

Many of Ms. L's teaching practices aligned with the tenets of music learning theory, which is one of the leading theories of how people learn to listen to and participate in the act of music. Music learning theory posits that music is learned through a similar process to how we learn language, which begins with audiation, also described as listening comprehension (Gordon, 2012). Within her classroom, Ms. L implemented a variety of audiation exercises, which focused on enhancing students' listening comprehension skills. These exercises included "call and response" activities in which students would listen to Ms. L as she sang and then repeat back what they heard. In addition to this, Ms. L taught using the whole, part, whole strategy which splits up an entire piece into smaller, more digestible sections for call and response. In her instrumental classes, Ms. L would often play the melody the students were practicing before they began practicing while stressing the importance of listening.

Just as learning a variety of words is important for the development of a child's language skills, so is learning a variety of music. That said, another important element of music learning theory is exposing students to a variety of music which includes songs with different meters, rhythms, key signatures, and songs from a variety of cultures and musical practices. In her lower elementary classes, Ms. L made a conscious effort to include a diversity of songs in her students' repertoire, including some songs with complex rhythms and others with lyrics in Spanish. Throughout my observations, it was clear that Ms. L knowledge of Music Learning theories was manifested within the classroom and teaching practices. These learning theories incorporated by Ms. L bolstered essential skills needed by students to succeed in music education spaces, and feel more talented.

Mr. D – Humanism

Within the context of education, humanism is a student-centered approach that focuses on the healthy development of each student towards their full potential (Aung, 2020). The humanist teacher focuses on developing positive self-esteem within students, as opposed to disseminating information. The origins of humanistic philosophy as it is known in the academic field today, can be traced back to Abraham H. Maslow, who rejected the notion that behavior is predetermined by one's environment and subconscious. Instead, Maslow theorized that every person has a set of hierarchical basic needs, and that lower needs must be satisfied in order to fulfill higher needs (Madsen & Wilson, 2012). Educators who embody humanism in their teaching practices build on Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs", and prioritize the needs of their students as opposed to course material.

Throughout my observations in Mr. D's classroom, I noticed multiple ways in which he prioritized the needs of his students. To begin with, Mr. D spent ample time during each class developing a sense of belonging while boosting his students' self-esteem. For example, at the beginning of each class, Mr. D prompted his students to share "good things", or events in his students' lives that they found exciting or positive. By opening up his classroom to student voices, he fostered a communal environment where each student was encouraged to express themselves. Multiple students shared "good things" with their classmates, demonstrating their acts of self-expression and comfort within Mr. D's classroom. By operating within this humanistic framework, Mr. D promoted an air of acceptance in his classroom, where students felt that their presence was valued.

Another way Mr. D's actions helped to address his students' more basic needs was by encouraging his students to fulfill their physiological needs. For example, when students wandered into his classroom during lunch time, Mr. D ensured that they had eaten something for

lunch. He communicated to them the importance of eating and physical wellness in relation to learning, and in some instances offered his students some of his own snacks. In helping students meet their needs inside and outside of class time, Mr. D demonstrated a humanistic teaching philosophy.

Section 3 - Reflections

In this section of the paper, I will reflect on my experiences while completing my capstone project and final thesis. Given that the purpose of this capstone block was to uncover the ways in which music teachers incorporate theories into their teaching practices to inform my own pedagogical approach, I will focus this reflection on my own personal takeaways. Furthermore, this reflection serves as a space to summarize my most important learnings and contemplate how to move forward with these in mind.

One of the most significant insights that I gained throughout my observations was realizing the critical role that non-verbal communication plays in the music classroom. For one, non-verbal cues can serve as a vehicle for teachers to communicate musical messages with their students. Every teacher that I observed incorporated visual cues within their instruction, whether it was through their use of Solfège solmization or typical gestures made when conducting. Sometimes, the verbal cues that I noticed were as subtle as a teacher making eye contact with a student and then fixing their posture, signaling to the student that their body position was limiting their ability to sing at the moment. When considering the different learning styles of each student it is evident that incorporating physical body movements into instruction helps support visual learners and provides an extra layer of communication between students and teachers. It is important to keep in mind, however, that meanings of certain body movements

vary across cultures. For this reason, it is important to be cognizant of how students react to certain movements, and which non-verbal cues students are most responsive to.

Another valuable insight I gained throughout the process of observation and reflection is that a teacher's first priority should be ensuring that their students feel welcome and safe in their classroom. This became apparent following a conversation with Ms. L when she told me that her role as a teacher was to provide a safe and consistent space for her students. She explained to me that in order to create this space, students must feel like they belong and that they are cared for by their teacher. One comment she made that I found interesting was that in order for students to feel like they are cared for, they need to know that their teacher will hold them accountable for following classroom expectations. In addition to this, teachers must remain consistent in what they choose to reprimand amongst their students. For example, a student might feel unsafe if they get in trouble one time for violating classroom expectations but not another time for repeating the same offense. This notion has encouraged me to question the things that I would call out if I were a teacher, and the extent to which I would enforce classroom expectations.

Moving forward, I believe that I am better equipped to begin my work as a teacher having completed this capstone project. The knowledge gifted to me by the teachers I had the pleasure to get to know will be carried with me and spread to those I teach in the future. Seeing these teachers in action inspired me to continue pursuing education following my graduation from CC. It was also in seeing those students light up during their music classes that affirmed my commitment to becoming a teacher.

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