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Troubling Certainty: Narrative Possibilities for Music Education¹

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As I read the narrative accounts in the previous chapters of this book, I found myself caught into the stories of the lives represented on the pages. As someone with little knowledge of music and music education, I felt filled with wonder about what it meant to live a life...

.... as a musician as I read the account of Jan Peterson who said “But being a singer it is in your head, it is—what you perform is actually you”;

.... as a pre-service teacher learning to teach music as I read the account of Anne who said, “I’m not a fan of lesson plans...It’s not that it’s hard, it’s just tedious. And it seems pointless...why can’t I just get up there with the music and work from there? Why do I have to have a set plan?”;

.... as a choir member as I read the account of Henry who said, “I love singing, I love music so much, and I love singing so much because singing is the only part of music that I can really do. I’m not competent enough with another instrument, so the voice is the one, and it will be a very sad day when I’ve got to give it up”;

.... as a cooperating music teacher as I read the account of Nora who said, “I spend an enormous amount of time with them.... As a result you can’t *not* have some sort of interpersonal relationship and you can’t *not* be affected by that...When a person is coming to you and is asking for help with their future, with their career...I take it seriously”;

.... as a specialist music teacher as I read the account of Anne who said, “Everybody should be heard. Everybody has got a story to tell, or a song to sing...And I think in my teenage years nobody would listen to my song, they told me I didn’t have a song or that my song wasn’t valid and I think of the kids who I work with and they can’t sing or they can’t speak and I think they’ve got a message to tell and it’s our responsibility...to find a way for them to express their message”;

.... as a school band director as I read the account of Grayson who said, “I pick a couple of tunes that I think the kids’ll like, kind of like a bait, and reel them in on a tune to get them to practice”;

.... as a university music teacher, Loretta Walker, who moved from university classroom to school classroom and back again as she said, “being deeply involved with children invited me to take a compassionate view of life. Their frank gazes invite us to honest self-examination, and their unguarded love will strip away our facades, if we let it. If we let the lessons that children teach sink into our souls, they will make us much better grown-ups.”

The richness of the stories of each person’s experience positioned in relation to music education helped me awaken to the complexity of music education. My own experiences in music education had done little to make me thoughtful about the teaching of music in schools. And as I read the chapters I was drawn into the richness of the lives

of the people whose stories filled the pages. Thinking narratively as I read the stories of their lives I heard the temporality of lives, lives that unfolded and enfolded over time, in particular places, embodied lives of people with emotions, moral sensibilities and a sense of the aesthetic possibilities as their lives were lived out on shifting landscapes. Music was threaded through each life.

One way of reading the book is to focus on the individual narratives of experience, each person's stories lived and told from unique vantage points, in each person's unfolding plotlines with attention to temporality, the personal, the social and place. There was much to learn from reading each narrative account as a stand-alone piece. For example, the narrative account of Jan Peterson taught me much about the lived experience of a music student. Who she is, and is becoming, was illuminated by her words, her stories, her parents' words, their stories of her, and David Cleaver's words and stories of both Jan and her parents interwoven with his own resonant stories of music. When I read each chapter on its own, I could see what I could learn from each experience. Each chapter called forth resonant remembering of my own experiences, experiences I have rarely storied as strong threaded in my life. I recalled country dances where local bands played; I recalled symphony performances, operas and ballets; I recalled soft music carrying out onto decks and porches on summer evenings; I recalled carol singing at the community hall; I recalled dancing in living rooms and in country halls. I could not recall music classes in school. Each chapter called forth much I could learn about my own knowing of music education, and, perhaps about the thread of music in my stories to live by.

However, as I read across all of the narrative accounts in the book, I began to sense the institutional, the social, the cultural narratives of music education that shape the landscape of music education and that shape the lives of the participants and researchers whose stories are represented in this book. From reading across the narrative accounts, across the representations of the lives, I began to sense the dominant narrative of music education and to sense the possibilities that Stauffer and Barrett see for shifting the dominant narrative of music education. As I awakened to my own stories of music and the absence of music education in my life, I wondered how many stories of music are silenced or kept secret as the dominant narrative shapes the landscape.

The Place of Uncertainty in Narrative Inquiry in Music Education

I wondered at Barrett and Stauffer's use of the phrase "troubling certainty" in the title of the book and in relation to music education. I wondered how they wanted readers to read the title. Could it mean that they hoped, through bringing narrative ways of thinking to music education, they could disturb the smoothness of how music is taught, that is, that music is a knowledge or sets of skills taught in a particular way. What was once certain, that is, the what and how of music education, would become less certain if we attended closely to the narrative accounts.

Or perhaps they wanted to cue readers to their intention of shifting the starting point of music education from the subject matter of music to the starting point of the lives

of children, teachers, teacher educators and others, and, through that shift in starting point, highlight the importance of lives with their embodied uncertainty. As I turned the subtitle over and over, I began to see the different shades of meaning in a kaleidoscope-like fashion as I played with what it might mean to trouble certainty in music education.

Certainty connotes that something is clearly established and/or assured. There are no question marks associated with it. I believe their title calls us to add question marks to music education through beginning to think narratively. It calls us to disturb, to trouble, the taken for granted institutional narrative of music education with a starting point in the certain knowledge and skills of music as well as to shift the narrative of music education to a starting point of lives, with an understanding of the interwoven nature of experience and education. Troubling the institutional narrative of music education necessarily troubles how we imagine teaching teachers to teach music, how we imagine children learning music and how we continue to work with children, youth and others in various vocal and instrumental ensembles.

I began to play with an idea borrowed from my colleague Florence Glanfield (personal communication, 2008) who spoke of a recent math conference with the provocative title *Becoming Certain about Uncertainty*. As Florence and I talked about uncertainty in music education and in mathematics education, she highlighted how the title chosen by Barrett and Stauffer troubled the certainty, the taken for grantedness of music education. In that choice, they made a place for acknowledging that the only

certainty that might remain is the certainty of uncertainty. It is, for them, narrative inquiry that offers the possibility of the necessity of troubling certainty in music education.

Understanding Narrative Ways of Thinking of Curriculum Making in Music Education

Through the narrative accounts co-composed by the researchers and participants represented in this book, I came to understand something more about curriculum making in music education. Reading the narrative accounts raised wonders for me about the lives of the researchers and about the people with whom they engaged in their narrative inquiries. Reading the stories of youth, teachers, choir members, teacher educators, and band directors allowed a multiplicity of voices to be heard. What could we learn from these narrative inquiries about what it means to compose a life as a teacher and teacher educator interested in thinking about curriculum making in music education with attentiveness to composing lives?

My view of experience is one shaped by the ideas of Dewey (1934, 1938) and it has, over the years, become a deeply narrative view of experience. While Dewey focused on the principles of continuity and interaction within situation as a way of thinking about experience, Michael Connelly and I (1988) began to think about Dewey's conceptualization of experience as a profoundly narrative one. We began to attend more directly to how we might read Dewey's ideas, taken up by Mark Johnson (1987) and Donald Schon (1983, 1987, 1991), and to see how we could re-imagine the idea of experience narratively.

As I think about my experiences and the experiences of children, teachers, parents, others and myself, I think narratively about experience, attending not to experience as vagrant shards but as narrative threads of experience unfolding and enfolding within embodied persons as they live in situations over time and in diverse places. Within a Deweyan view of experience, I have learned to be attentive to temporal unfoldings, as well as to the personal, that is, to the interaction of the personal and social, embodied in each person at the same time as attending to the “interactions of the embodied person with the social, that is, to the social, cultural, institutional narratives and to the minute-by-minute particularities of ongoing events” (Clandinin et al, 2006, p. 1). Attending to the particularities of place or places where events were lived and told as well as to the place or places where stories of those experiences were told and retold is also important. Thinking narratively, I have also learned to be attentive to the ways that language shapes social, cultural, and institutional narratives and how those narratives, in turn, shape each individual person.

This narrative sense of experience emerges in Loretta Walker’s chapter as she slides backward and forward in time, from “the halls of the grade school where I recently taught” to her present university classroom where she is a professor again. She slides forward to an imagined future of the children she taught “until those students are in their early 20’s, like most of my university students – or until they are 40 or 50, like a few of their older classmates.” She takes us to a scene she observes between a child and parent, “an attempt to postpone their parting hug” outside the school, and her feeling that her

imagined future “experience at this school would illuminate facets of life and learning in ways I had never known before.” She takes us to familiar places in the school: the music room, the faculty meeting room, and the playground. As she unfolds her storied experience, Walker lets us glimpse the institutional narrative of music education in which music teachers do not have classrooms and have meager resources, markers of a narrative in which music education is marginalized in the dominant story of school in which “academic” subject matter most.

The social, cultural and institutional narratives that shape individual’s experiences of music also become apparent in Kroon’s chapter as Kroon and Anne, a specialist music teacher, work together. Anne works against the grain of the dominant narrative of music education as a process of teaching musical skills and concepts. Anne foregrounds communication and social skills in her teaching of music. For Anne, music education becomes a story of inclusion, and of enjoyment. While note values, form, phrasing, and pitch are taught, Anne weaves them into a counter narrative, an against the grain undoing of what matters in music education.

Thinking narratively about experience is both a familiar idea and a strangely difficult idea. Thinking narratively opens up the necessity of acknowledging uncertainty, of knowing that each person’s experience is always contingent on time, place, people and events. The subtitle of this book acknowledges the uncertainty that narrative research allows us to glimpse in music education. This book causes me to wonder again about the certainty we sometimes think we can achieve in curriculum making whether in school

classrooms or teacher education classrooms. Griffin's (2007) study of how children's intergenerational stories of music making shape the classroom curriculum making highlights how there is no certainty in what each child will experience in a music classroom. Reflecting on her work with the children and their parents about the interconnections between in-school music and out-of-school music causes Griffin to call for "broader visions for what music education is or could be" (p. 186) and to work with pre-service teachers to reach beyond a narrow view of curriculum to one where "children's voices become genuinely embedded within their teaching practices" (p. 187).

My view of curriculum making is one that emerges theoretically from the work of Schwab (1970) and is one that has emerged experientially from more than 40 years of teaching and counseling in schools, teaching in university classrooms, working between schools and universities as a pre-service teacher educator and engaging in narrative inquiries with children, youth, parents, teachers, both pre-service and in-service, administrators and others. What I have come to know as a curriculum maker emerges from being positioned in these multiple ways and as I engaged with various theoretical ideas about curriculum.

Following Schwab (1970), curriculum can be understood as the interaction of four curriculum commonplaces—learner, teacher, subject matter, and milieu (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). In order to understand the negotiation of curriculum, we need to attend to each commonplace in relation with the others, in shifting relational ways. We see this in Walker's music classroom as she acknowledged the official music curriculum with its

designated “musical concepts and skills” to be mastered at each grade level. As I read her chapter, I saw how these skills and concepts were her starting point, but she attended closely to what the children knew and did not know. Working within a particular school, community, and state milieu, she created an in-classroom milieu where children such as Joshua and Marcus could express who they are and are becoming. This view of curriculum making asks us to understand teachers like Walker by attending to each teacher’s personal practical knowledge, his/her embodied, narrative, moral, emotional, and relational knowledge as it is expressed in practice. This view of curriculum making asks us to understand children as learners and to understand their knowledge as personal, relational knowledge (Lyons, 1990; Murphy, 2004). This view of curriculum making asks to attend simultaneously to the nested milieux of different school places such as in- and out-of-classroom places, community places, state or provincial places, countries, and so on.

As Walker storied her classroom curriculum making in this airforce base school, I watched how a particular subject matter, slow music, became funeral music, and shape-shifted to the children’s experiences of family deaths in conflict zones. Walker awakened and wondered “how is it that one piano sonata can provoke all these comments about death, sadness, and fear that someone might die?” She realized as she awakened that their “mutual experience with this music had created a sacred space.” As curriculum makers, I realize that different subject matters are structured by the dominant narratives of the discipline. In Walker’s classroom, music was structured by the skills and concepts of the

mandated curriculum but the negotiated lived curriculum was a curriculum that made lives visible.

Michael Connelly and I (1992) wrote that curriculum “might be viewed as an account of teachers’ and children’s lives together in schools and classrooms” (p. 392). Lives in such a view are central to the negotiation of curriculum. Curriculum is a course of lives in motion. As we have written elsewhere (Clandinin et al, 2006), “within this complex fluid mix, lives are what become central. Lives, people’s experiences, who each of us are, and who we are becoming are central” (p. 173). Imagining the place of a curriculum that places lives at the center of curriculum making draws attention to the importance of staying wakeful to people’s experiences. As I read Walker’s chapter, I saw that she became wakeful to how she and the students had come to see music as “something we did together.”

Lives also became central in the curriculum making that Nora engaged in with her student teachers in Davis’ chapter. As Davis described Nora he described her as someone who “occasionally displays inconsistencies in her views and practices.” For Nora, “these inconsistencies merely corroborate Nora’s own view that she has not finished learning to be a teacher.” In Davis’ account, it was Nora, the teacher, whose life became central in curriculum making with her student teachers. In the curriculum making in the classroom when the student teacher, Nora, and the children were together, it was all of their lives in relationship that was the space of curriculum making.

Conceptualizing Narrative Inquiry in How it is Taken up in Music Education

While there is a great deal of debate about the borders of narrative inquiry, and about whether or not we should police those borders, there is some agreement on the following definition.

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience of phenomenon under study (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375).

There are different starting points for narrative inquiry, that is, either telling stories or living stories. While most narrative inquiries begin with telling stories, that is, with a narrative inquirer interviewing or having conversations with participants who tell stories of their experiences, “a more difficult, time-consuming, intensive, and yet, more profound method is to begin with participants’ living because in the end, narrative inquiry is about life and living” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 376).

In the chapters of this book, I see different starting points: some narrative inquirers begin with telling stories, others with living stories. The book is the richer for it. Some of the chapters that begin with telling can be seen, using Chase's (2005) categories of different approaches to narrative inquiry, as following more of an identity approach with a focus on how people construct themselves within institutional, cultural, and discursive contexts such as Ferguson's account of Josh and Anne or a sociological approach with a specific focus on specific aspects of people's lives such as Langston's narrative account of Henry. Other chapters that begin with living, such as the autobiographical narrative inquiry of Walker, offer readers another way of understanding narrative inquiry.

What the chapters in the book offer readers, then, are different ways of seeing the starting points for narrative inquiry and different possible approaches. However, the various chapters also highlight tensions at the methodological borders as narrative inquiry bumps against more formalistic and reductionist methodologies. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) highlight, there are tensions with the place of people, context, certainty, action and temporality at the reductionist border. There was little evidence of tensions at this border in these chapters. I could, however, sense tensions at the formalist border around the place and balance of theory, people and the place of the researcher in some chapters. These tensions highlight the ways that narrative inquirers push against the edges of more dominant methodologies and how we often find ourselves in what Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) see as methodological borderlands.

Justifying Narrative Inquiry in Music Education

Earlier I wrote that I imagined Stauffer and Barrett as wanting to shift the dominant narrative of music education, to make the taken for granted less filled with certainty and more open to question, to wonder, to wide awakesness about what could be otherwise. They want narrative inquiry to be more than a “‘musical ornament’, an elaboration on the established themes of psychometric inquiry, those of measurement and certainty” (p.1). While each narrative inquirer locates him/herself differently in their personal justification, I sense the importance that the work offers to each researcher. But there must be more than a personal justification in research. It is necessary to be able to answer the “so what” and “who cares” questions about our narrative inquiries and to do that there must also be practical and social justifications. I sense that Barrett and Stauffer justify the overall work of introducing narrative inquiry within the area of music education as a way to shift the dominant social narrative of music education, to make it more responsive, more inclusive of the lives of all people, regardless of who they are and how they are positioned on the landscape. They imagine troubling as a way to give pause for thought and to prompt the music education community to consider the many ways in which we know and come to know. They link their justification around troubling certainty to Maxine Greene’s (2001) notion of wide awakesness, a way of living that Greene hopes will help us to look beyond the taken for granted. They borrow Greene’s words in their hope that music teachers can learn to be “open to the mystery, open to the wonder, open to the questions is the one who can light the slow fuse of possibility even for the defeated one, the bored one, the deserted ones” (Greene, p. 146).

As Barrett and Stauffer challenge us to trouble certainty we need to understand that what works in shifting the dominant narrative is always what works “for now”. As the dominant narrative of music education begins to shift and change as music teacher educators and researchers take up the challenge of inquiring narratively into the living, telling, re-telling and re-living of individual’s experiences of music education, we need to remind ourselves that what works “for now” depends on each of us remaining open to the possibilities that things can be otherwise, in our music classrooms, in our choirs, in our bands, in our music education classrooms. As Greene (2001) reminds us, we need to find ways to stay awake to the shifting landscapes and to what is happening to us in these uncertain, tumultuous times.

As others take up the challenges that Barrett, Stauffer, the researchers and participants in this book offer, I believe that we can compose spaces that help all of us, as researchers and as music educators to stay “open to the mystery, open to the wonder, open to the questions” (Greene, 2001, p. 146) of each life, each music teacher’s life, each child’s life, each student teacher’s life as they dance along on this shifting, changing landscape. There is, indeed, no certainty, only the certainty of uncertainty, in what will happen next in music education. And it is from attending to wide awake ways the lives of children, youth, families, teachers, and others that are being shaped in, and through, music education that will enable us to make sense of the uncertainty that faces us all.

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