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'When I say "modern", you say "band"': A critical narrative of modern band and Little Kids Rock as music education curriculum

ABSTRACT

This article is based on the lived experiences of the authors engaging with modern band and the organization Little Kids Rock (LKR). We approach this research as critical storytelling to highlight the importance of critique of music curriculum and pedagogy. We identify moments of cognitive dissonance we experienced with LKR and modern band and unpack them through theory. Data included review of LKR materials, journals, text messages, reflective writing and discussion around participation in LKR-sponsored events. We share our critical story through text messages and narration, through which we note issues such as neo-liberalism and indoctrination; language (mis)use through educational

buzzwords; identity reformation and the manner in which teachers feel a need to cling to methodolatry or act as change agents. We illustrate the central role critique plays in music teaching discourses and practices to guide music teachers to accept vigilance of curricular resources and pedagogical approaches presented to them.

INTRODUCTION

New – or seemingly new – ideas, approaches and tools are ever-present in music education discourse, made manifest through organizations, methods, conferences, curricular materials and more. Pressures of praxis shock (Shaw 2018), confronting calls for innovation and change (Kratus 2007) and nego-tiating diversifying school music populations (Butler et al. 2007; Elpus and Abril 2019) as well as course content (Clements 2010; Hess 2015) challenge teachers as they seek to enact curriculum and search out professional devel-opment. Yet, as Regelski notes, teachers can 'abdicate personal authority and responsibility by accepting without question a wide variety of [perspectives] as being good, necessary and sufficient for understanding and dealing with the challenges of life' (2005: 5). Regelski (2005) and others (Allsup 2008; Benedict 2009a; Benedict 2009b) advocate for music educators to critically consider prior to wholesale or even modular adoption of approaches, tools and theo-ries lest they run headlong into a vast 'variety of social problems of the most profound pragmatic character' (Regelski 2005: 6).

The content in this article is based on our own experiences with and theo-retical analyses of Little Kids Rock, or LKR, 'a [US-based] national non-profit that is dedicated to building a world where kids can live rich, purposeful lives by ensuring that all public school children have the opportunity to unlock their inner music makers' (LKR n.d.a: n.pag.). The organization provides trainings for teachers and offers instruments for use in classrooms primarily in urban centres from Los Angeles to New York City. Throughout the past four years, we – the authors – have attended workshops, training sessions and the annual *Modern Band Summit Conference* for teachers, administrators and professors. At each event, we experienced a mix of emotions, from excitement and appre-ciation to concern and confusion. As such, the purpose of our inquiry is to demonstrate critical reflection and problematization, essential characteristics of music education. We use what Jackson and Mazzei call 'plugging in' (2012: 21) to theory in order to develop new ways of reading and understanding phenomena such as pedagogy, curriculum and methods. Rather than focus-ing on protracted theoretical analysis, we model what thinking through theory might look like in the flow of experience and as a way to critique aspects of one's teaching world.

We work in a similar vein as Allsup (2008) and Clements (2008), seeking new alternatives within, beyond or buried within a new curriculum and/or pedagogy. Foucault famously stated,

> My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do […]. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger.
>
> (1994: 256)

While we focus on critique, we wish not to erase the positives – such as the many popular-based bands and new songs that have risen out of LKR-informed teaching. Instead, we position LKR-informed teaching as an example to peel back layers of pedagogy and curriculum to critique ideology that may sit unquestioned within this form of practice, to help determine which may be the main danger(s) in LKR. We identify moments of cognitive dissonance we experienced with LKR and modern band (MB) and unpack them through theory.

Cognitive dissonance is the phenomenon of holding more than one contradictory feeling, value and/or belief (Festinger 1962). It is also a phenomenon that many are at ill-ease with and for which they seek means of finding consonance, even if that means avoiding confounding or troubling elements (Festinger 1957). Cognitive dissonance thus acts as a narrative framework through which we encourage readers to see the positive and empowering aspects of LKR along with problematic facets, thereby working against consonance or resolution of dissonance.

APPROACH TO INQUIRY

This article is based on the lived experiences of the authors as participants in practitioner conferences, research presentations, critical reading and in both teaching and researching related to music learning and teaching. We engaged in natural observations through personal participation in LKR-sponsored workshops at state-level music education association conferences, attendance at a higher education training week and taking part in the summer music conference – LKR's *Modern Band Summit*. During these events, we journaled, memoed, text-messaged and reflected on our experiences.[1] In addition, we explored LKR-created materials such as text from their website, promotional videos, research articles, teacher resources and documents.[2] While we did not anticipate nor plan to study this organization entering our participation at these multiple events, this study generated in a holistic way as we reviewed and reflected upon our experiences. Two primary questions structured our process of deconstructing our lived experiences with LKR: (1) how might music educators use moments of cognitive dissonance to critically examine curriculum and pedagogy? and, (2) how might music educators 'plug in' to theories in order to critique music education curricula such as MB and LKR as curriculum?

We drew on a narrative-based structure (e.g. Polkinghorne 1995) to interpret our personal stories, as apparent in how we experienced and made sense of our lived experiences, as well as a narrative means of sharing our post-event deconstruction of our lived experiences with LKR. Through independent reflection and analysis of our experiences and collaborative discussions, we identified key experiences and issues that demonstrate critical openings. After gathering examples of these experiences and critiques, we constructed mini narratives inspired by the critical storytelling of Barone (1989, 1992) and 'plugged into' (Jackson and Mazzei 2012) theory and theoretical frameworks. Taking inspiration from Leavy (2015, 2016), we transformed data into semi-fictional structures in order to best communicate findings in a manner evocative of life as lived. We present the data in both descriptive narratives as well as in the form of text/online messaging conversations, indicated by :: *bzz* :: for one speaker and *:: bzz bzz ::* for

3. Little Kids Rock (n.d.b) defines 'guitars, basses, keyboards, drums, vocals, and technology/computers' as the main instruments for MB.

the other. We intentionally do not identify the individual speaker with an author given the semi-fictional constructed nature of conversations. It is important to note that while we employ fictional elements, the events depicted are real and we were present for them. We have constructed other characters who are amalgams of people we naturally observed, giving them names and backgrounds to add depth to the narrative, in accordance with suggestions of Leavy (2016). Many of the characters, including other teachers in attendance at events with us, are not based on any one person and we did not create them through interview-based data. In order to protect anonymity, we have given pseudonyms to those who we encountered as presenters or speakers. To avoid detracting from the narrative, we have placed all further citations as footnotes. Our hope is that 'these stories [are] sufficiently compelling [in order to inform a] kind of meaningful education reform that empowers […] people to tell their own critical stories to themselves and others' (Barone 1992: 146).

Theories and ideas to guide the reader

In the narratives below, you will encounter numerous theories either directly through constructed dialogue/text message or alluded to through the actions of others and shared imagery. We 'plugged in' (i.e. Jackson and Mazzei 2012) to these theories and analysed generated data and created structures through which we combined data and moulded the narratives. 'Plugging in' is a process of connecting different 'ideas, fragments, theory, selves, sensation' to 'produce something new in a constant, continuous process of making and unmaking' (Jackson and Mazzei 2012: 1). According to Jackson and Mazzei, the process of 'plugging in' challenges conventional coding in qualitative data interpretation and analysis by thinking with and through theory. In this study, we plug into fragments of theories to help better understand the phenomenon of MB and to demonstrate how music teachers might use theory during their everyday experiences, specifically in moments of cognitive dissonance.

Holding particular weight in the narratives is the notion of neo-liberalism and Woodford's (2014) discussion of neo-liberal indoctrination. In conjunction, we explore the manner in which language is (mis)used and conflated, often through the use of edu-speak and other buzzwords. We draw on identity as a factor in the narratives to demonstrate the means by which group and individual identities are reshaped utilizing Ibarra's (1999) theory of provisional selves. Finally, we explore the manner in which LKR encourages teachers to feel a need to cling to methodolatry (Regelski 2005) and/or to act as change agents. We invite you, the reader, to join us in these experiences, articulated in the narratives.

State Music Education Association Conference *session*

We walk into a crowded conference room to hear music teachers chatting, finishing up their lunches and some trying out guitars, basses, keyboards, a drum kit and other musical technology.[3] As the session begins, the presenters sit front and centre in the room, playing guitar and singing directions to get everyone moving.

We (i.e., :: bzz :: and :: bzz bzz ::) sit in different places in the room. A phone begins to quietly vibrate:

:: bzz :: We need to have a chat about this. I'd like to talk with you about it

:: bzz bzz :: 👍 [4]

:: bzz :: It looks like some of the teachers have really been transformed by these ideas. I have some questions about this whole thing

Paul introduces himself and provides an overview of terms: 'Hello all, we are from LKR, a nonprofit organization originally from Palo Alto and now in schools all across the country'. On the screen behind Paul reads, 'LKR donates necessary instruments, and curriculum, meeting a key need of many school music programs. [LKR] serves over 500,000 children nationwide in order to empower "teachers to build music programs as diverse as the kids they serve"' (LKR n.d.a: n.pag.).

Glenn, another LKR presenter, jumps to the centre and explains,

teachers can use the instruments to help students make music as a MB. MB is basically just a term that is used such as concert band or jazz band or marching band. We're talking about music education that is inclusive and relevant to students these days.

(LKR 2018: n.pag.)

:: bzz bzz :: Relevant to which students? The ones from L.A., the ones from rural Illinois, those in urban centres. […] I mean, there's a big spectrum

:: bzz :: Is this some uber-method? Legitimizing it in terms of ensemble paradigm. Giving something for teachers to grab onto

Paul shares a bunch of percentages – approximations of the number of students who participate in secondary music, saying, '[w]e haven't done enough to address this'. He continues to share that LKR uses 'innovative', 'inclusive' strategies for 'connecting' and building a community of 'diverse' students in flexible ways (LKR n.d.c). 'Anyway', Paul says, 'that's enough of the logistics, let's play. Come on up and grab a guitar'.

:: bzz :: Innovation, inclusive, connecting, diverse …

:: bzz bzz :: When I think about it that way, these words aren't centered within any specific theoretical position and are treated like buzzwords, which makes LKR sound like a neoliberal-orientated organization

5. Image description: a light bulb emoji.

6. Kumashiro (2008).

7. Poole et al. (2016); Rigas and Kuchapski (2016).

8. Apple (2011); Apple (2017).

9. Ross and Gibson (2006).

10. Krashen (2007).

:: *bzz* :: I think I know what you mean but 💡 [5] enlighten me

:: *bzz bzz* :: Some call neolib an ideology or policies that focus on the market over public institutions or issues.[6] Think privatization and marketization in the forms of packaged curricula, standardized tests, and other measures of accountability for teachers and students.[7] BUT it's disguised as taking these ideas … er, resources … and replicating[8] (or adapting it flexibly[9] to your own needs) paving your own way to be 'inclusive' and 'innovative'

The session unfolds as Paul and Glenn teach attendees some basic skills on guitar, bass and drums, as well as engaging them in a type of simplified rapping that gets everyone moving and making music. Throughout the session attendees smile and laugh as they fumble through chords, backbeats and bass lines, many of them playing these instruments for the first time ever. As the session comes to a close, Glenn shares a message from the founder who explains the 'theory' behind MB, 'music as a second language':

I hope you've enjoyed this session and I just wanted to make sure I had a chance to tell you about the heart behind this, music as a second language (MSL). I started my work as an English-as-a-second language teacher working with children in Palo Alto. As I developed what would become LKR, I started to reflect on Stephen Krashen's Theory of second language Acquisition[10] and saw the overlaps between music learning and language learning.

:: *bzz* :: Overlaps like …?

Since then, I've developed MSL because having a theory like this can help music teachers to 'encourag[e] communication without concern about whether it's correct'; 'minimize self-correction and self-monitoring'; 'avoid teaching grammar at first'; 'give easy to understand input'; and 'keep anxiety levels low'.

(LKR 2019: n.pag.)

:: *bzz bzz* :: I dunno but I would like to know what overlaps he sees between music learning & language learning

But, 'as with any pedagogy, MSL is a tool for your teaching tool-belt, a spice for your instructional skillet. Please season your classes with it to suit your taste. My only hope is that you will find it useful as a means of bringing the transformational gift of music into your students' lives'.

(Wish 2014: 3)

:: *bzz* :: It was so nice to see the teachers having fun making music together, especially since for so many of them it was their first time playing these instruments. But I don't get that whole MSL thing [...] like, how did that play into what we just did learning to play those couple of tunes, right?

:: *bzz bzz* :: Well, it's adaptable?

:: *bzz* :: But isnt theory supposed to drive pedagogy?

:: *bzz bzz* :: That's what I learned and teach my students

LKR website

:: *bzz bzz* :: Hey, I've been looking through the LKR website and it has so many of Woodford's hallmarks of neoliberal indoctrination. take a look: https://www.littlekidsrock.org/

:: *bzz* :: Ok, can you give me the Woodford 101?

:: *bzz bzz* :: Woodford says, 'As already suggested but that needs to be said more explicitly, among the most obvious and harmful ways that music education contributes to the indoctrination of the public are through (1) the creation of musical fantasy theme parks that serve to distract children from the world and its problems; (2) the idealization and stoking of reverence in children for tradition and the cult of the celebrity; (3) the endless musical repackaging and propagation of the aforementioned sacred myths and narratives about heroic figures (including composers, performers, and pedagogues), institutions, things, and events that are sometimes based on a foundation of lies or half-truths and are similarly intended to infantilize rather than educate; and (4) the creation, performance, or other uses of music and pedagogical methods that are meant to overawe, intimidate, or "terrorize people unfamiliar to its practice"'.[11]

:: *bzz bzz* :: Woodford talks about these 'fantasy theme parks' and LKR has the yearly Summit for teachers, admins, and professors, right?

:: *bzz* :: Yes, I've been to them. They are like a rock summer camp for adults with lots of training sessions. The Summit page says 'learn from the best', 'have fun', and 'earn CEUs'.[12,13]

11. Woodford (2014: 30).

12. CEUs stand for 'continuing education units'.

13. Little Kids Rock (LKR) (n.d. d).

14. Little Kids Rock (2009a). Also, for more examples of this type of rhetoric, see: Benham (1991); Pergola and Ober (2012); West (2012).

15. These ideas on programme cuts were public on LKR's website and messaging well before the COVID-19 outbreak and budget-related cuts to the arts in schools.

16. Little Kids Rock (2009b).

17. Frierson-Campbell (2007).

18. Woodford (2014: 29).

:: bzz bzz :: And Woodford talks about the 'cult of the celebrity' … there are a bunch of famous artists all over their promotional videos who talk about why music and music education is important …

:: bzz :: Including Lamb Chop! Look at this: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-yEQnE7Dow&list=PLfl9eaMvCqPngz 3YZ-CgHA1LMWQysXMIT&index=71&t=0s

:: bzz bzz :: Anyway, the videos on the website begin by describing the bleak status of music in schools amidst budget cuts: 'There are millions of children in schools that are offered no musical education at all'; 'Music programs are being ripped out of school'.[14]

:: bzz :: LKR's website seems to only mention it, but they don't give any specifics[15]

:: bzz bzz :: Yet they then position LKR as the remedy to the problem: '…there's an organization called LKR that offers free musical instruments and lesson plans to schools all around this country'.[16]

:: bzz :: Well, with budget and funding cuts in education, music teachers are often left to be economic entrepreneurs in their own classrooms. they have to acquire materials and resources for their students on their own[17]

:: bzz bzz :: Right. but the 'ultimate neoliberal takeover of education for music educators and their programs has been that they now primarily serve an economic purpose and are becoming increasingly dependent on business for funding and thus also for professional direction', says Woodford.[18]

:: bzz :: Exactly. And there's a constant likening of MB to the traditional ensemble structure, saying things like MB is 'just like jazz or concert band but with different instruments'.

Three hours later ...

19. See Ross and Gibson (2006).

20. Woodford (2014: 30).

21. NAMM Foundation (2017).

22. Woodford (2014: 30).

:: bzz :: I'm watching some of the website vids now. Some of these people aren't even talking about the organization, they're just talking about music in general. Sammy Hagar talked about the importance of music more generally. Ne-Yo said that because the schools can't provide resources, LKR can. and then Smokey called LKR an arts education organization. So they get the star-studded person to make the commentary rather than local programs (they have less media glamour). So, more of the idealization of tradition of pop music and cult of the celebrity highlighting that there is no alternative to help music education but LKR.[19]

:: bzz bzz :: Yeah, exactly. and the 'endless […] repackaging and propagation of the […] myths and narratives'[20] about 'a pandemic of program cuts', the importance of celebrities and other figureheads …

:: bzz :: Add to that: 'people, and companies, and donors, and sponsors and boosters and bands that have rallied around LKR and enabled [them] to do what [they] do today'. This organization is apparently single-handedly 'restoring and revitalizing music education programs'[21]

:: bzz bzz :: Okay, so we are 3 for 4 of Woodford's neolib indoctrination. What about 'creation, performance, or other uses of music and pedagogical methods that are meant to overawe, intimidate …'?[22]

:: bzz :: Well, there's the music as a second language thing that seems to be filling in for a pedagogical method or theory. I'd imagine that seeing children and other classically trained teachers playing pop music on instruments not common in many classrooms might be intimidating

:: bzz bzz :: Yeah, like, look how nervous and excited the music teachers get at the trainings we've been to – they're totally intimidated at first but they jump in to learn as much as they can.

:: bzz :: Maybe a trip to rock band camp is just what the doctor ordered?

Modern Band Summit: Opening session

There we sat, sifting through our swag bag of picks, sticks, stickers, plastic bottles of water and countless advertising materials. The entire room is abuzz with chatter and the collective sound of five hundred music teachers slurping their morning coffee. As we see some LKR folks moving to the stage, three

large screens display the group's logo and a cycling set of corporate sponsors, including Hot Topic, Epiphone and the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM), to name a few.

Everyone seems to take their seats at the same time, continuing their conversations, swag sifting and coffee slurping until the room goes dark. From the darkness emerges the sounds of horns, keyboards and drums. The lights resurface on the stage to show the entire LKR staff performing 'High Hopes' by Panic! At the Disco. The room jumps to their feet watching the performance, many in-service teachers cheering and dancing in their spots.

> :: *bzz* :: A teacher next to me turned, patted me on the shoulder, and earnestly exclaimed, 'welcome to church'

pBones buzz, Squire Strats and ukuleles by the dozen strum while the crowd shouts the lyrics to the chorus of 'High Hopes':

Had to have high, high hopes for a living,
Didn't know how but I always had a feeling,
I was gonna be that one in a million,
Always had high, high hopes.

(Urie et al. 2018)

Some attendees hold their hands high, seemingly all chanting in unison: active members and recruits to MB.

> :: *bzz bzz* :: Well now I have 'high hopes' for this conference

The crowd applauds, the logos for numerous supporting organizations and vendors pop up around the LKR logos on the three screens, as a bubbly man leaps to the podium, flails his arms and shouts, 'HELLOOOOOOOOOOO MODERN BAND! When I say, "Modern", you say, "Band". Modern'. 500 voices respond, 'BAND'. This repeats countless times.

> :: *bzz* :: This certainly is overawe inspiring[23]

> :: *bzz bzz* :: And a little intimidating for someone not familiar with this organization or conference

> :: *bzz* :: Take it all in, a musical fantasy park

Modern Band Summit: *Breakout sessions*

> :: *bzz* :: *Hey*, what session are you going to next?

> :: *bzz bzz* :: I might go jam in one of the instrument rooms up on the third floor with some other music teachers. You?

> :: *bzz* :: I think a session on assessment and learning standards in MB.

> :: *bzz bzz* :: Okay, have fun 👏 👏[24]

I (*:: bzz ::*) walk through the halls, passing banners displaying photos of students and teachers 'rocking out' sponsored by Harman (an audio and audio-visual company that markets mostly to the automobile sector) and enter one of the breakout rooms. Each room is filled to nearly bursting. I find the room with the session on 'working with special education students' and squeeze into a seat in between two in-service teachers on whose laps I am nearly sitting. I hear the two teachers introduce themselves to one another over my head: André, a grade 3–6 music teacher from Kansas is on my right and Ah Lam, a high school music teacher in New Jersey, shakes with excitement on my left. I hear André say that this Summit is his first foray into the MB world, while Ah Lam replies that she has been involved in MB for at least eight years.

The session presenter, Karen, a middle-aged woman with blond, pink and blue spiked hair and a Nirvana t-shirt hanging over her dress pants moves to the front of the room. After some cursory conversation about student IEPs,[25] Karen discusses assessment for all learners, saying

> Lots of districts are talking about having students show evidence and discourse of learning. So, when they turn and talk to their partner about their 4-measure compositions, they're doing both of those things and you've just hit a district learning target. BAM! And if the admins still need proof, just tell them about music as a second language; I'm sure they'll be impressed.

:: bzz :: Just heard a reference to music as a second language. Have you learned anything about it yet?

:: bzz bzz :: Sry 🎸 [26] out rn

Ah Lam, MB veteran, snaps a picture of the slides and leans across me to touch André to get his attention. 'I just love this', she loudly whispers, getting out her LKR branded pencil and scribbling notes on a pad of paper emblazoned with an unidentifiable corporate sponsor logo.

> My admins always keep changing the language they use and want us to use. Teaching is as teaching was and LKR knows that. They show us how what we're already doing is what we need to be doing, just with some guitars, you know.

André looks past me with a confused look to Karen.

Presenter Karen says, '[s]o, student engagement is a really big thing that principals are interested in. This is a great way to show that'. She holds up a behaviour chart festooned with guitars and drums and begins to explain how to use it to track students' outbursts in order to know how long they should get to play drums after each class. Many attendees take pictures of the slide, 'Ooh, don't worry, this entire presentation is available online on the website for LKR teachers so you can get the templates. You can share your ideas on the website, too; and once you do, LKR can use your materials and will help share it to others' and then continues to her next slide.

Ah Lam points to Karen and faces André,[27] '[y]ou see, they give you so much that you can just take home and use without having to think much of it to prepare'. She opens up her bag and grabs chord charts, keyboard finger

25. Individualized education programmes are used in US schools to support students with disabilities. See the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act for more information.

26. Image description: a red electric guitar emoji.

27. To reiterate, many characters portrayed in these narratives are fictitious, yet based upon an amalgamation of people we naturally observed.

28. Woodford (2014).

29. Regelski (2005).

30. Kumashiro (2008);
    Ravitch (2010).

placement cards and a USB drive in the shape of a guitar: 'This drive right here has all of the PowerPoint slides for getting students to know how to play guitar, bass, and drums. You just put it into your computer and go'. 'Yeah', quips André, 'sounds like the VHSs my music teacher used to use when they were sick or tired'. Ah Lam responds, '[m]aybe, but did your music teacher get free guitars and drum sets for attending a PD?'.

:: bzz :: I don't know if I or most people here really *gets* MSL, but they utilize it and the idea of theory to name what they are doing while, and I hate to say this, replicating and reenacting activities. The presenter seems to even suggest using MSL and other buzzwords to communicate with admins, which would only establish superficial relationships in the sake of shallow advocacy

:: bzz bzz :: Well, it seems like using MSL and reenacting the activities without critique might be an easy way to let others think for you. Granted, there are days when I might welcome someone to think for me.

:: bzz :: Yes, it lets others tell us what to do – though LKR prides itself on taking its ideas and making them work for you. So, there's a little bit of uncertainty here since those two notions don't quite align. It's like falling back on a theory without understanding it.

:: bzz bzz :: Woodford noted that neoliberalist entities repackage words and narratives.[28]

:: bzz :: This is like the presenters demonstrating how attendees could meet the languages imposed on them by administrators without need of much change or critical reflection. So, in this sense, that language becomes codewords for teachers' day-to-day survival in their school settings. MB serves as a catch all to hit benchmarks of student engagement, discourse, assessment, and other current educational terms accepted in an uncritical manner.

:: bzz bzz :: Sounds a lot like Regelski's[29] work and how music teachers can uncritically accept theory especially when it serves advocacy ends

:: bzz :: Also, I have to mention the buzzwords that becomes the impetus for one's teaching choices,[30] like 'Transforming lives by restoring, expanding, and innovating music education in our schools!' on the homepage. You've got (1) transforming, (2) restoring, (3) expanding, and the big one, (4) innovating. But what do those words really mean here?

:: *bzz* :: Or (5) engagement, (6) innovate, (7) diverse, and (8) inclusive like we heard at the MEA session … they're slogans.

::*bzz bzz* :: It's edu-speak, pseudo-educational veneer with connections to 'language of the market'[31] that streamlines the organization with current trends. And that might provide a sense of educational and market superiority to LKR and its 'products'

:: *bzz* :: *B*ut you know, there is something here that opens me up to wanting to hear and believe the buzzwords … you can't tell me that hearing Victor Wooten, Smokey, and other famous artists telling meaningful stories about how music saved them and sharing slogans with excitement doesn't move you somehow

:: *bzz bzz* :: What about the sights and sounds of kids 'play[ing] the music that they know and love … [and] see[ing] themselves reflected in the curriculum'?[32]

:: *bzz* :: Yes, even my Grinch heart grows three sizes over that; who wouldn't be drawn to that?

:: *bzz bzz* :: Maybe that's the danger?[33]

Two hours later …

:: *bzz bzz* :: Hey, you know what I heard? When MB teachers share their work – lesson plans and teaching materials – on the portfolio page of the website they can earn more resources. There's incentive to gain materials. There seems to be this buzz around the *idea* of equal distribution of goods for equal opportunity

:: *bzz* :: That's very neolib, especially if you think from Horsley's perspective, if you think about the market providing things to nurture well-being[34]

:: *bzz bzz* :: As if market strategies and privatization make the world go right. And giving out pre-packaged curricula and other measures of accountability[35]

:: *bzz* :: School choice, reading and writing from kindergarten to bolster test scores for funding, 'this concert brought to you by [local business]', and so many ads. I guess maybe neoliberalism is everywhere in k-12[36]

:: *bzz bzz* :: And it's often flashy or intimidating[37]

31. Hill (2006) noted the presence of slogans and buzz 'language of the market, where lecturers "deliver the product," "operationalize delivery," and "facilitate clients' learning," within a regime of "quality management and enhancement"', (2006: 119–20); Ravitch (2010).

32. Little Kids Rock (2017).

33. Foucault (1994: 256).

34. Horsley (2015: 69).

35. Poole et al. (2016).

36. Apple (2011, 2017); Sleeter (2017).

37. Woodford (2014: 30).

38. We use 'rock stars' here and elsewhere as a positive, aspirational position.

39. Woodford (2014: 30).

:: *bzz* :: So it seems like overall, we take these things – buzzwords, pre-packaged curricula, pedagogy and methods – at face value and jump in head first instead of looking more deeply pre-dive. Cognitive dissonance at its best.

Summit: Concert on the hill: Rock stars under the stars

At the summit, teachers from around the country came together to form bands, practise and perform at evening social events, including a bowling alley and a final barbeque outside on the campus quad. Our band, full of higher education music teacher educators, performs two tunes. We came off the stage to some applause. Following our act, an army of Miami MB teachers takes the stage framed with the logos of corporate sponsors.

:: *bzz* :: So many logos!

:: *bzz bzz* :: This bottle of water: brought to you by hot topic.

:: *bzz* :: It's product placement … or corporate placement

Thunderous applause engulfs the hillside as a lead singer dedicates the set to Miami 33012 and 'all the modern band soldiers out there'. After they play a scorching and skilled set, a series of small bands from states such as New Jersey, Missouri, Connecticut, Illinois and California take the stage in quick succession. As we sat on the hill, we noticed the excitement, confidence and overall extroverted attitudes of the teachers playing: 'They are out here playing and acting like they are rock stars at this fantasy theme park',[38] one of us said. 'It's really rad, don't you think?' responds the other, 'I wish more people could get chances like this, say in their music education curriculum'. We noticed that most of the bands play rough, dirty and a little out of tune, but that does not faze the crowd of primarily classically trained music teachers who are all in, caught up in this rock extravaganza experience. They see their peers and, by proxy, themselves as rock stars.

:: *bzz* :: You know, where else are a bunch of music teachers going to get together and be wined and dined, forget about the realities of 'the world and its problems'[39] and be lauded and cheered for by hundreds of strangers? It's like, they really think – and act – like rock stars.

:: *bzz bzz* :: Yeah […] and it's pretty awesome to see this. But, you know, I wonder […] is there perhaps a downside to this? Does this breed a culture that seeks out the 'heroic figure' – the rock star – and views them 'reverence […] of the celebrity' in their cheering, like Woodford says? As in, is the rock star culture an affect of the neoliberalism woven within LKR?

:: *bzz* :: I know, right? It's like they now have permission to break from their pasts and can be something so completely and joyfully removed from 'doing band' in the ways they were taught ☺ MB fills a void in their teaching – and like, even in their identity.

:: *bzz bzz* :: They're trying on different roles …

:: *bzz* :: Oh, do you know Ibarra's[40] theory of 'provisional selves'?

:: *bzz* :: Ibarra first talked about adolescents and how they try on roles almost like costumes on halloween as they grow. But, here, these adults seem to get a chance to try on roles that they either never were offered or seen as legitimate. So, they try on the role of rock star, since the role of chorister, instrumentalist, and conductor, are the primary roles offered in music teacher education programs.

:: *bzz bzz* :: Umm, just so you know, I was a rock star in college, excuse you

:: *bzz* :: Okay, great for you, but what if you hadn't been and you were offered this chance? They're being given a space to imagine new identities … possibilities … for themselves as teachers. it's a 'way of believing in a possibility and behaving as if it exists'.[41] Here, there are loads of possibilities beyond being the 'band director' … they're able to rehearse identities that might seem outside of their normal in order for them to bring it back into their classrooms.

40. Ibarra (1999).

41. Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010: 10–11).

As the bands play, other attendees walk around the quad with food, alcoholic beverages, continuing to applaud and cheer the musicians.

:: *bzz* :: It's as if regardless of the potential paperwork and problems at home, regardless of concerns of recruitment and assessment, regardless of feelings of being siloed in their own academic homes,

:: *bzz bzz* :: It's as if here, in the fantasy theme park, they are the rock stars, valued; here they are rich in music and in esteem.

:: *bzz* :: But does it feel fake?

:: *bzz bzz* :: Fake? You mean this big concert w/ all the lights? Maybe contrived?

:: *bzz* :: But who wouldn't want the chance to feel like a rock star and be treated like one every now and again?

42. Image description: an emoji of a person with long yellow hair and a purple shirt in a shrug pose, with palms up near the face and raised shoulders.

43. Image description: an emoji of a person with long yellow hair and a purple shirt with a hand over face in 'face-palm' pose.

44. Regelski (2005).

:: bzz :: I certainly didn't have a chance like this before

:: bzz bzz :: Not even in undergrad? You never did an open mic or played a gig at a club?

:: bzz :: 🤷 [42]

:: bzz bzz :: okay then 🤦 [43] Perhaps this MB summit is just what your teacher self needs, friend. So, wanna sign up for another performance slot?

Summit: Poster session chat

Ahead of me (*:: bzz ::*) is a sign that says 'Poster Session' with an arrow pointing downstairs. I am surprised by how much louder sounds get with each step I take. I pass through a small doorway into a large room with tables, tri-fold posters, instruments and so many teachers. I walk down the aisles and float through a mix of music and speech, eavesdropping on the presentations of people identified by LKR as 'modern band teachers' and the supportive comments and questions of their colleagues.

At one poster, a teacher has tacked multiple guitar grips and chord assistive devices to the tri-fold along with pictures of students using them and the title 'Making MB Inclusive'. I linger and listen to the presenting teacher, Alisa Jones-González from Denver, explain,

> MB is wonderful; it's great. But, there are some more things we need to do to make it inclusive for students with physical disabilities. When I got my instruments, I was so excited and I started gathering song charts and making my own. But, in each class, it seemed like at least one or two students struggled with just holding or working the instruments. I thought, 'oh, I never learned how to adapt, what am I going to do?' I dug through *MEJ* articles and attended sessions by people like Kim McCord and Alice Hammel. They didn't specifically say anything about adapting MB instruments, but I played around with the suggestions and searched for adaptations already available, So, here are some of the grips and holders I use.

I watch as she demonstrates different tools and explains the benefits and constraints of each. It makes me think about Bell's 'Guitars have disabilities' (2014) article and I decided I would share that with the teacher via their e-mail posted on the handouts so I did not disturb their flow: 'they are a rockstar', I thought to myself, 'look how they have gone above and maybe beyond the "method" of MB or MSL. I doubt Regelski[44] would worry about methodolatry right here'.

I continued to pass posters and presenters, each of whom were crowded with colleagues seeking their ideas.

:: bzz bzz :: Hey, where are you?

:: bzz :: Downstairs at the poster session, you should come down here

:: bzz bzz :: On my way

We met out near a poster about incorporating contemporary Black artists and musics into MB settings. The presenter, Alfonse Smith from the Bronx, talks about the importance of adding more music and people/identities to the MB classroom. He plays a JDilla beat and gets us all rapping quickly and then shares some examples of Black punk, country, hip hop and rock musicians.

'Okay, where has this been the entire Summit?' one of us asks.
'I know, these teachers are just hitting it out of the park', the other responds.
'They are making these resources and training their own to the point that if they weren't all at a MB Summit, I doubt you'd realize they were connected in that way; no sense of required orthodoxy there'.
'I'm excited by this, but it makes me even more disoriented about MB, MSL, and LKR'.
'Cognitive dissonance, my friend, cognitive dissonance'.

Summit: Closing session

It is the last day of the Summit. The shock of the barrage of ads and slogans mixed with the lack of sleep has not diminished the excitement from the first day. As we all gather in the massive conference hall, some teachers sing and play 'High Hopes' in different corners of the large hall as the main lights dim and the theatre lights raise again. As a spotlight fixes on a podium in the middle, the leader seems to pop out of nowhere with a ukulele. As he strums a rhythm, the words 'Music will' shine on the three movie screen-size projections. He speaks, accompanying himself, repeating verbatim a message we heard at a previous LKR event, and gives a little message about the power of music and the meaning of the event to develop a future 'where kids can live rich, purposeful lives by ensuring that all public school children have the opportunity to unlock their inner music makers' (LKR n.d.a: n.pag.). He motions to the crowd to stand up and continues:

Leader: Okay, when I point, you say 'Music will' [points]

Crowd: 'Music will'

Leader: What builds kids' confidence and increases their happiness?

Crowd: 'Music will'

Leader: What will help kids make more meaning in their lives?

Crowd: 'Music will'

Leader: What will develop our most precious natural resource: our children's creativity?

Crowd: 'Music will!'

> **Leader:** What will make the world a more harmonious place, literally and figuratively?
>
> **Crowd:** 'MUSIC WILL!'

The leader motions for the crowd to sit and then adds more to his message:

> You know, we aren't anything, we're just paper pushers. You're the real soldiers, you're the ones in the trenches fighting the good fight. You are modern band and I encourage you to do the good work and spread it so all children can have music in their lives.

Music rushes up through the sound system, pictures from the week flash on the huge screens, and the group sings another round of 'High Hopes' together:

> Fulfill the prophecy, be something greater
> Go make a legacy, manifest destiny
> Back in the days we wanted everything, wanted everything
> Mama said, burn your biographies, rewrite your history
> Light up your wildest dreams …
>
> <div align="right">(Urie et al. 2018)</div>

OPENINGS

Throughout the narratives, we have attempted to draw attention to moments of cognitive dissonance and instances in which we articulate both seemingly positive aspects of LKR alongside those aspects that appear problematic, and vice versa. While we have focused on the problematic – and perhaps it is equally problematic to focus more on the problematic aspects of LKR – we have also attempted to highlight the beneficent aspects in LKR and LKR-informed work. It is worth outlining more, however. For example, LKR raises money and donates thousands of dollars in instruments and other resources to schools. They provide training and potentially on-going support for teachers, many of whom might be singletons in their schools and feeling isolated, helping them feel supported. They have provided monetary support for teachers and professors to attend their summer Summit conference, a conference many would most likely not be able to attend without such support. And, they have created a community of people who feel that they are allowed to shed their previous band director selves and see themselves as rock stars as musicians and teachers. In other words, they felt a sense of permission to teach in a way they wanted to and felt would be best for their students but had not previously felt empowered to do (Shaw 2020: 457–58).

Our goal is not to expose this organization as 'bad' or 'unsuccessful'. The purpose of this article, rather, is to model a 'plugging in' (Jackson and Mazzei 2012) of theory to inform critique of the steeped systems and structures that music educators call and use as curriculum. Using LKR as a backdrop, we draw upon our experiences to illustrate possible dangers inherent in embracing resources and ideas from organizations without thinking and reflecting on the implications of such actions. In our text talks, we model moments where we experienced confusion – cognitive dissonance – around the curricular materials and structures, as well as the importance of critical reflection no matter one's pedagogical choices. Clements (2008) cautioned about the attraction

of new structures and systems, warning that they should not divide between '"the right way and the wrong way" curricular model, which is simply replacing traditional methods with a new one – one "soap box" to another' (2008: 8–9). Is LKR a new soapbox? Is it just old wine poured into new bottles? Regardless, we hope that a critique of LKR can open up alternative ways to engage with new and old curricula and the type of nonprofits that are readily prevalent today. This type of critical reflection ought to extend outside of this organization, and brought to other ideas, ideologies and structures.

We have modelled one way to critically read and consider curriculum and pedagogy rather than accepting and applying these outright. Through a critical position, music educators can be constantly steadfast and not allow others (e.g., teachers, scholars, organizations or companies) to think for them. When music educators allow others to think for them, 'abdicat[ing] personal authority and responsibility' (Regelski 2005: 5), they might be complicit in furthering ideological agendas of which they are not aware, agendas that serve to disrupt equity and standardize ways of learning, making music and knowing. Through such an investigation, we hope we have demonstrated the central, if not essential role, that critique plays in modern music learning and teaching discourses and practices. We now invite you to enact your own problematization and critique as you come into contact with new or seemingly new ideas, approaches and tools to music learning and teaching; to name key aspects of a pedagogy and curriculum, and the critical concerns/dangers apparent in pedagogy and curriculum that are in need of consideration.

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