

Fostering Inclusive Spaces in PreK-12 Music Classrooms

By Elizabeth Cassidy Parker

“Boys line up on this wall.” I gesture and second grade boys begin to scramble to the hallway adjacent to the music room. “Girls over here,” I point to the opposite wall. With a quizzical face, Anna approaches me and says, “Ms. Parker, I like to play with boys and wear boy clothes—I feel like a boy, but I’m a girl. Can I line up with the boys?” I reply, “Of course.” Anna lines up with the boys and students appear unfazed by her decision. Later, Anna’s classroom teacher indicates that when groups are separated by gender in the classroom, she often joins the boy group without incident.

The above interaction with Anna occurred approximately 20 years ago in my general music classroom. Until I met Anna, I often referred to students by their assigned gender¹, “boys” or “girls,” and thought nothing of it. In the school where I worked and as a student in PreK-12 classrooms, teachers routinely separated children by assigned gender. Today, even though a number of schools have consciously adopted gender-neutral language and practices, I frequently observe interactions structured around assigned gender. The issue in using gender binaries like boy or girl, even in elementary schools, is that not all students identify as one or the other. Anna was one such example who expressed a multifaceted gender identity. Conversations with her led me to consider how I might create a more inclusive classroom community—a community that would embrace a spectrum of gender identity. I knew if Anna was speaking openly about her gender identity, there might be other students who questioned aspects of their identities. This led me to question ways in which I could create a safe and supportive environment for all students.

Music classrooms often represent a “home away from home” - a culture of their own, and a place for students to belong (Adderley, Kennedy, & Berz, 2003; Morrison, 2001; Parker, 2010). Though music classrooms may represent safe spaces for students, I continually ask how music educators can become stronger advocates for students who might be questioning their assigned gender. I feel provoked by music education scholars like Nichols (2013), who powerfully co-wrote with Rie, a gender-variant² student. Rie had positive experiences in school music in both band and choir, but did not feel her music teachers were her allies. Additionally, outside of music class, when students harassed Rie, teachers did not intervene to stop it. Rie’s experiences align with other educational research that highlights frequent in-school harassment for transgender students (Grossman et al., 2009; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010).

In Rie’s story (Nichols, 2013), the music room felt safe because teachers and students were intently focused on a shared goal: musical achievement. Though Rie experienced safety, her safety was not related to feeling acknowledged as an individual. It was only when Rie continued in a home-schooled high school music program that she was able to build a warm rapport with a music teacher. Rie could sing in the preferred voice part and choose the feminine concert clothing. Rie described in her story that the music teacher had heard her and affirmed her gender identity.

As I reflect on both Anna and Rie’s experiences, I am reminded of Noddings’ (2003) transformative writing on the ethic of care. Noddings centrally situates a teacher’s role to build caring relationships *with* her students. Teachers, as the ones-caring, extend themselves to their

¹ One’s assigned gender is commonly based on biological sex at birth (see Kilman, 2016)

² An individual whose gender expression or behavior does not match assigned gender norms.

students, the cared-for, to more fully understand the world through their eyes. In caring relationships, teachers seek to know their students and receive them as they are. O'Toole (2005) further extends Noddings' writings within a music education context. She describes music-making and musical interactions as important building blocks toward stronger and healthier self-identity. If teachers can agree that student identity-building is critical in the music classroom, then how can music educators foster positive identities and nurture caring relationships—relationships that can help to transform the school building and community?

Music educators can be advocates with all students. Hayes (2016) recommends music educators communicate with and invite other teachers to join in creating safe spaces for all students. As Reynolds and Talbot (2016) eloquently stated in the Fall 2016 issue of the *PMEA News*, educators can act together as messmates: "Messmates don't call people out; instead we call each other in, into the conversation." (p. 28). Music educators are skilled at fostering collaboration—collaborations in the school building that have potential to effect lasting change. One such collaboration might be to work with teachers and administrators to create school-wide policies that specifically protect transgender students from harassment and bullying. The GLSEN National School Climate Survey (2015) underscored that when specific populations, such as transgendered students, are protected in school policies, individuals experience a more supportive climate.

Staying with Reynolds and Talbot's messmates analogy, unpacking one's beliefs is messy. Music educators should regularly unpack their assumptions about their students and refrain from relating gender identity to musicianship. In choral classrooms, a changing-voice musician can stunningly perform the highest soprano line, just as in instrumental classrooms, a petite-framed musician can powerfully play a tuba solo. With regard to concert dress, music educators should work together with students to determine appropriate performance uniforms that affirm varied gender expressions (see Palkki, 2015). Music educators can also practice using gender-neutral language and ask students their preferred gender pronouns. In general music classrooms, students can be grouped at random, by numbers or letters, or by birthday month. Teachers can refer to the full group as musicians rather than boys and girls. Finally, as music educators work to showcase diverse musical practices and styles in their classrooms, they should highlight a wide diversity of music-makers, including transgender individuals.

Music educators can model safe space in both word and action. When teachers intervene to stop verbal and physical harassment, students feel safer at school (Quinn, 2002). In Silveira and Goff's (2016) study, music educator survey respondents indicated it was their responsibility to stop negative comments based on student gender identity. Teachers who do not tolerate denigrating remarks about any group or individual send a clear message about embracing all of humanity. In closing, as McCall (2016) thoughtfully articulated in the Winter 2017 *PMEA News*, educators should consider their activism authentic to local contexts and continue to ask themselves what is most needed in their communities. By adopting a "global" mindset, music educators can work toward what is most critical for their students while situating their work in larger ongoing dialogues that contribute to both local and global consciousness.

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