

# Musicking for Social Change: Music Educators' Perceptions of Social Justice Education

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## Introduction

- Social justice education (SJE) is broadly understood as the pedagogical work of challenging the systems, structures, and discourses that oppress, exploit, and exclude (Bialystok, 2014).
- Despite the transformative potential of SJE vis-à-vis music education (Hess, 2019), there is limited research on how the concept of SJE is perceived by secondary school music educators. This matters because music educators' perceptions of SJE inevitably shape their orientations toward and relationships with students, pedagogy, music, and social justice in potentially harmful ways (Spruce, 2017).
- Therefore, in the spirit of conscientization (Freire, 1968/2000), this study interrogates Grade 7 to 12 Manitoba music educators' perceptions of SJE in pursuit of more equitable and just ways of engaging in music education.

## Research Design

- Multi-perspectival bricolage approach to methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; White & Cooper, 2022)
- Tripartite theoretical framework:
  - Critical theory (Giroux, 1983)
  - Post-structuralism (Foucault, 1976/1978; Paechter, 2001)
  - Anti-colonialism (Dei, 2006)
- Semi-structured interviews with 10 Grade 7 to 12 music educators
- Research questions critically examine how participants:
  - Conceptualize SJE
  - Understand the importance of SJE in relation to their roles as music educators
  - Understand the connections between social justice, music education, and the Manitoba music curriculum framework
- Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

## Analysis

### The hegemony of the Western classical ensemble paradigm

- Participants' perceptions of SJE are constructed within and constrained by the dominant discourses of the Western classical ensemble paradigm
  - This paradigm privileges technical skill development, performance excellence, an aesthetic philosophy of music education, and colonial musics and ways of musicking
  - These practices and discourses tend to marginalize the aim and work of social justice

### The salience of liberal discourses of SJE

- Participants' perceptions of SJE are largely informed by liberal discourses of social justice
  - These discourses—including neutrality, tolerance, salvationism, and the pursuit of a “level playing field”—potentially invisibilize unequal power relations and normalize coloniality
  - Only addresses the immediate consequences of inequity and injustice rather than actively challenging the power structures and discourses that produce them

## Findings

### Conceptualizations of SJE

- Instrument access
  - Understood within a liberal paradigm of distributive justice
  - Perpetuates a discourse of salvationism
- Diversifying repertoire
  - Taken up in superficial and liberal ways through an additive multicultural approach which reinscribes the colonial center
- Critical dialogue
  - Only enacted opportunistically due to time constraints owing to the primacy of skill development

### Importance of SJE

- Participants state that SJE is important, yet their “good intentions” can be interpreted as a settler move to innocence due to their colonial and liberal framings of SJE
- SJE is discursively constructed as less important than skill development and performance excellence

### Curricular Connections

- The curricular areas with the strongest perceived connections to SJE are not typically enacted in the music classroom
- The curricular area with the weakest perceived connection to SJE dominates the Manitoba music education landscape

## Discussion

- Western classical ensemble paradigm excludes students' diverse musics and ways of musicking which is disempowering
- Primacy of technical skill development and the pursuit of performance excellence excludes alternative forms of justice-oriented musicking
- Aesthetic philosophy of music education within a liberal paradigm decontextualizes and depoliticizes music and music education which invisibilizes the sociocultural underpinnings that give meaning to musical experiences
- Liberal conceptions of SJE veil sociohistoric relations of power and fail to critique systemic inequities
- Not teaching for and about social justice within and through music denies students the opportunity to engage in praxis
- SJE requires (musical) action which is absent from participants' perceptions and conceptualizations

## Significance

- Despite music educators' best intentions, efforts to enact social change through music education may inadvertently embody oppressive potential
- Music educators must disrupt the hegemony of colonial musics and musical epistemologies as well as challenge taken-for-granted liberal discourses of social justice in pursuit of more inclusive, equitable, and just ways of engaging in and through music education

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