Music education for social change in the United States: towards artistic citizenship through Little Kids Rock

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Keywords:

Music education, social change, Little Kids Rock, modern band, music as a second language, artistic citizenship

Abstract:

Public education in the United States is often woefully under-funded, especially in the arts, despite a federal mandate to provide music education for all. Where music programs exist in US schools, they tend to focus on teacher-directed large ensembles that afford students little agency or creative opportunity, playing music that alienates a majority of young people. Faced with the volume of evidence pointing to the benefits of including music in a well-rounded education, philanthropy-funded nonprofit companies such as Little Kids Rock step in to fill the vacuum in state provision. This paper is a descriptive, intrinsic case study that describes how Little Kids Rock provides culturally relevant music making experiences for young people in schools, through a learning approach called music as a second language and alternative music classes termed modern band. Little Kids Rock builds a nationwide community of innovative music pedagogues by training teachers, donating musical instruments and sharing original curricular resources. This paper includes examples of two modern band teachers – one working in a rock band context, and the other a hip hop facilitator. The work of these and other teachers is ever more urgent in an era in which the U.S. perpetuates an intense neoliberal capitalism that oppresses and marginalizes vast numbers of its own people. Little Kids Rock aims to foster artistic citizenship wherein music makers recognize social and emancipatory responsibilities with the aim of transforming lives for the better.

1. Introduction

Public services, including public education, are often poorly funded in the United States, leaving a vacuum to be filled by third-party organizations. Schools in the U.S. are funded to a large extent based on local tax revenues, so areas with less wealthy populations tend to have poorly funded schools that attract less aspirational teachers and instill in students (as well as media reports about them) a pervasive sense of themselves as failed citizens, undeserving of success in education, in work or in life (Reay, 2017; Wright, 2010). In a cycle of failing in a system, for incorporation into which lower SES students have not been adequately prepared (National Education Association, 2015), and in which their difference from upper middle-class norms is characterized as stupidity, inherent inferiority, and un-teach-ability (Giroux, 2018; Illich, 1971; Jones, 2016; McKenzie, 2015), education non-profit organizations find opportunities to provide meaningful and valuable educational experiences that may otherwise be missing from students' lives. One such organization is national music education non-profit, Little Kids Rock. Arts education brings demonstrable and consistent improvement in academic performance, when comparing students who have received arts education with those who have not (Americans for the Arts, 2017; Ruppert, 2006). This knowledge – combined with the federal mandate through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), that music should be a part of every child's education, regardless of

personal circumstances – provides a powerful incentive for Little Kids Rock to bring culturally responsive music pedagogy and programming to U.S. American schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2015; Wan, Ludwig & Boyle, 2018).

2. Little Kids Rock

Little Kids Rock aims to create sustainable system change in school music education in the U.S.A. by providing professional development, musical instruments and curricular resources for teachers. The catch-all term for the product that Little Kids Rock provides is 'modern band'; this includes popular music ensembles, creative activities such as collaborative and individual songwriting, beatmaking with digital audio workstations, and more. 'Modern band' is seen as a peer and alternative to the traditional large ensembles (orchestra, choir, marching band, concert band, jazz band) that comprise the vast majority of music education and music making opportunities for children in U.S. secondary education (Abril & Gault, 2008; Allsup & Benedict, 2008; Fonder, 2014; Williams, 2011)

A core component of the professional development is introducing teachers to the pedagogical approach, 'music as a second language' (M.S.L.). As noted by Powell & Burstein (2017), M.S.L. 'is less about music as a communicative tool (language) and more about music learning. As such, Music Learning as Second Language Learning (M.L.S.L.L.) could arguably be a more accurate description' (p.246). Developed from Krashen's (1982) work on second language acquisition, the approach recalls aspects of Green's informal music learning (Green 2002, 2008) and Suzuki's incorporation of principles of language learning into his violin pedagogy (Wish, 2017, p. 5). M.S.L. approaches music learning in a non-formal way, embracing facilitation (Cremata, 2017) over direct instruction. M.S.L. embraces music learning as:

> A natural, subconscious process similar to the way people pick up their primary language. It relies upon meaningful usage of the new language and natural communication. Speakers focus not on the 'correctness' of their speech, but on the communicative act. (Wish, 2017, p. 10)

A core tenet of the M.S.L. doctrine is that 'learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition' (Wish, 2017, p. 11); this premise is applied to music learning (or music *acquisition*) in order that young people experience fewer social and psychological barriers to meaningful participation in music in school. As Byo (2017) found in his case study research, modern band in schools creates collaborative communities (Byo, 2017, p. 6) and provides 'meaningful, authentic, and valuable music education' experiences for young people (Byo, 2017, p. 9). Inasmuch as it assiduously avoids didactism or prescription, M.S.L. is (like Green's informal learning), arguably best understood as 'an ethos, or approach, and not a pedagogy *per se*' (Linton, 2015, p. 302).

The principal model of professional development is a one-day introductory '101' training course, with a further '102' workshop available and usually taken by around 80% of teachers in receipt of initial training. Another model of professional development is provided to music teacher educators from collegiate settings; for these professors, Little Kids Rock provides five-day, 'boot camp' style training session. All of Little Kids Rock's training and resources are provided for free or at significantly reduced cost; Little Kids Rock is financed by philanthropy funding, a very common business model in the U.S.A. for 'third sector', non-profit organizations. Little Kids Rock operates nationwide, with operations in 46 out of 50 states and the District of Columbia. Since 2001, Little Kids Rock has partnered with state government, districts, schools, and teachers to reach more than 850,000 K-12 students in almost 400 school districts.

3. Methodology

This article is a descriptive, intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995, 2000) of Little Kids Rock. The case study is contextualized with considerations from sociological literature that provide a rationale and background for the work of the organization. The authors discuss how public education in the U.S. is endemically unjust, and explain how the curriculum, pedagogy and teacher training program of Little Kids Rock serve to help address the systemic deficit in public education provision. The authors provide two examples of teaching praxis based on Little Kids Rock's program components of Modern band and Music as a Second Language – one is from

the perspective of a (broadly conceived) rock-band teacher, and the other from that of a hip-hop educator. We argue that there is an urgent need to work towards equity and justice in a society increasingly divided economically, with a sustained and deepening crisis in adherence to democratic ideals.

None of the three authors of this article provides an unbiased perspective, since each is employed by the organization. Gareth Dylan Smith works for Little Kids Rock as in an evaluative role, seeking to understand the context in which the organization undertakes its operations as well as how and how well its programs serve to meet the observed needs in society. Warren Gramm develops and manages partnerships with schools and school districts, while Kenrick Wagner works on the team developing curricular resources to serve students and teachers. Gramm and Wagner both have significant experience as teachers/facilitators bringing the Little Kids Rock modern band curriculum and learning approach to students. Prior to working for Little Kids Rock, Gramm worked for 11 years in urban Jersey City, New Jersey, facilitating daily modern band classes with racially mixed children aged 10 to 14 years of age. The students were largely in receipt of free or reduced-cost lunch, an indicator of lower socioeconomic status. Wagner worked for 11 years in various schools in New Jersey, New York City and around the U.S., teaching demographically mixed children aged six to 18 years around once per week for three hours. Smith is a social scientist who holds a research position at New York University. While the authors recognize the lack of objectivity we bring to this paper, we would also acknowledge the value that insider understandings provide (Chang, 2016). Bresler and Stake (2006) acknowledge that 'in music education, we have a need for… experiential understandings of particular situations' (p.278), and Muncey (2010) contends that 'subjectivity doesn't infect your work, it enhances it. Making links between your own experience and your [scholarly] work is healthy' (p.8). Contextualizing and considering our work in this article has proved insightful to the authors in our reflexive professional practice, and we hope that readers may also learn from the work.

4. Addressing a societal need

Little Kids Rock envisions 'a world where music empowers people to lead creative, rich, and purposeful lives' (Little Kids Rock, 2018). Many people of course lead creative, rich and purposeful lives, involving varying or even minimal degrees of musicking. However, in light of the role that music plays and the value it holds for people, especially for middle- and high-school age young people (MacDonald et al., 2009; Miranda, 2013), music educators and music education policy makers are arguably obliged to provide music programs that include all students and that help them to develop positive identities as valued citizens and confident, empowered members of society (D'Amore & Smith, 2016). Derived from its vision, Little Kids Rock's mission is to transform lives (Little Kids Rock, 2018), closely aligned with Elliott, Silverman, & Bowman's (2016, p. 3) notion of 'artistic citizenship'. These authors assert that music should be practiced as a form of '*ethically guided citizenship*' (p. 6, emphasis in original), based on the premise that 'artistry involves civic-social-humanistic-emancipatory responsibilities, obligations to engage in art making that advances social "goods"' (2016, p. 7). They go on to describe 'artists' in ways that indeed speak to and encourage a democratic, community-oriented and culturally responsive music education, affirming that, 'by "Artists", we mean to include people of all ages and levels of technical accomplishment (from amateurs to professional practitioners) who make and partake of art(s) of all kinds… with the primary intent of making positive differences in people's lives' (Elliott, Silverman, & Bowman, 2016, p. 7). Unfortunately, such a view is rarely the view taken of artistry or, by extension, musicianship in policy, schooling, and music teacher education. Instead, the music education system can be classist, sexist and racist, based on largely un-checked colonial and commercial assumptions and goals that emphasize elitism, competition and exclusion (Bull, 2016; Powell, D'Amore, & Smith, 2017; Williams, 2011).

The ideology undergirding and characterizing most music education in the U.S. is not *taught* to students or music teachers. All, however, learn it. For this reason, it has been termed the 'hidden curriculum' (Froehlich & Smith, 2017, p. 102). Abbott et al. (2014) describe it thus, as:

> The unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values, and perspectives that students learn in school. While the formal curriculum consists of the courses, lessons, and learning activities students participate in, as well as the knowledge and skills educators intentionally teach to students, the *hidden curriculum* consists of the unspoken or implicit academic, social, and cultural messages that are communicated to students while they are in school. (Abbott et al., 2014, emphasis added)

As such, while a small, 'elite' group of people come to identify and be identified as musicians, most people learn through passive identity realization (Smith, 2013) that they themselves are *not* musical and are *not* musicians (Welch, 2001). Wright (2017) stated that, 'diverse personally and culturally relevant music education that develops the musical talents and abilities of all young people and equips them to continue making music throughout their lifespan should be a human right'. In the United States, 79 percent of high school students are denied this right (Elpus & Abril, 2011, p. 134), representing 'an almost 10% decline in music participation' since 1982 (Elpus and Abril, 2011, p. 138)

We are witnesses to and complicit participants in a system where, as Ruth Wright (2018a) has articulated:

Through a hidden process disguised within a supposedly egalitarian model of education, certain classes of young people are predisposed to succeed, coming from family backgrounds that provide the cultural capital required to access the code of education. The fact that this code is secret, written into the very language of education, makes the failures of others appear to be based on lack of ability, as natural, rather than as the skewed outcomes of a skewed system. (Wright, 2018a)

Bourdieu calls teachers and the education system failing students 'symbolic violence' (2000 p. 168). Henry Giroux is more strident in his critique, describing 'the ongoing war on economically advantaged youth and communities of color', arguing that this way extends also to 'the economically disadvantaged, transgender people and undocumented migrants' (2018, p. 39).

Right now, citizens and residents of the United States are living through a particularly challenging period. The white supremacist, conservative Christian, unfettered capitalist ideology upon which the U.S. was founded, has led, perhaps unsurprisingly, to a situation in which 'the Trump presidency has unleashed a type of anti-politics that unburdens people of any responsibility to challenge – let alone change – the fundamental precepts of a society torn asunder by open bigotry, blatant misogyny, massive inequality, and violence against immigrants, Muslims, the economically disadvantaged, and communities of color' (Giroux, 2018, p. 23). In education, as throughout contemporary society, 'Many people now find themselves living in societies in which they experience a kind of social homelessness detached from and invisible to the policies and language of those in power' (Giroux, 2018, p. 25).

Elliott & Silverman (2014, 58-59) affirm that 'music does not have one value; music has numerous values, depending on the ways in which it is conceived, used, and taught by people who engage in specific musical styles' and communities. As such, little Kids Rock's programs cherish and respect the voices of all students as individuals from distinct cultures and communities. This is a powerful ethos that can lead to creating an artistic citizenry capable of articulating and standing up for itself. Through inclusive, culturally responsive music education programming that brings relevant music and validating music-making experiences to the school classroom (that is, focusing on music that students know and like, as well as music that teachers and parents engage with outside of school), Little Kids Rock teachers engage young people who are frequently otherwise excluded, 'embracing the idea of children as agents and active participants in the construction of musical knowledge' (Linton, 2015, p. 303). The modern band ethos recognizes all young people as having a voice worth hearing. As Ranciere (1991) noted:

Emancipatory education . . . starts from the assumption that . . . all students can already speak. It starts from the assumption that students neither lack the capacity for speech, nor that they are producing noise…when we classify such sounds as noise, we are not stating a psychological fact but are introducing a political distinction. (pp.39-40)

Modern band and M.S.L. enable and enact equal opportunities for young people, by focusing on creativity in music. Instead of defaulting to performing music written by white male composers, the modern band curriculum empowers ethnic minorities and students of all genders to write their own music, through its core values of composition and improvisation. Little Kids Rock's Modern band programs in schools help to bolster young people's confidence by focusing on development of creative, collaborative skills, and experimenting without fear or judgment. Through recognizing students' voices as valid and vital in their music-making experiences, modern band teachers are expanding music participation in the USA; this despite the fact that a majority of Little Kids Rock trained teachers still struggle to teach or facilitate composition, songwriting and improvisation into their classrooms. Data indicate that music enrollment that is four percent higher

across a school district in schools including a modern band programs compared to schools that do not have modern band programming (Quadrant Research, 2017; Little Kids Rock 2018). Randles (2018, p. 226) found that a significant majority (76%) of 'teachers indicate that their students are more engaged in their music class since incorporating the LKR curricula and modern band at their school'.

5. Examples of Practice

The following two accounts of using modern band and M.S.L. pedagogy in schools richly illustrate how concepts and practices developed by Little Kids Rock and its community of music educators can look when put into practice by teachers. The first example is from Warren Gramm, who worked for eleven years as a middle school teacher in an urban setting in New Jersey, USA. The second example is by Kenrick Wagner, a social entrepreneur and hip hop artist who has spent fifteen years working as a music educator, performer, author and producer.

Example of practice: Warren Gramm, classroom teacher

'We're really appreciative of the time you took to interview here, but we're going to go with a more traditional candidate'. These were words I heard from administrators when I interviewed for teaching jobs with what I thought was a vast amount of experience in the field. This came after I had proudly showed interlocutors numerous pictures of my classroom, the walls adorned with posters of classic rock musicians, guitar chord charts and drumbeats meant to aid in playing popular music. My walls reflected what was going on in my classroom – kids playing and loving the music they knew. That, to me, was modern band. In the urban middle school[1] where I taught, plenty of students could not care less about school and would tell their teachers that their grades and school work did not matter – least of all music class, which in my setting had little bearing on their educational advancement. The attitudes in my music classroom changed dramatically when I began telling students that they were going to be learning how to play a Rihanna song, participating in an upcoming rap contest, and getting to play rock grooves on the drum kit. At that point, I had more of each student's attention, and the motivation to do well in class was not dependent on what grade they would receive. Throughout my teaching career, student engagement was at its highest when my lessons were student-centered.

My first year as a teacher was occupied with instructing students through textbooks where they learned and heard *about* music. I assumed that the best thing to do that year would be to tell my students all about the greatest events in music and why they should love it as much as I did. This approach did not work well. My students were bored and I quickly realized that I needed a new approach. During this time in my teaching career, Little Kids Rock held a workshop in my school district, during which I was quickly turned on to and enculturated into a community of educators who saw a need for change in school music and addressed that need through what would come to be codified as 'modern band'. Modern band became a fluid entity in my classroom, intended to meet students at the places where they were comfortable regarding repertoire, instrumentation and improvisation. Every class in my teaching day looked different.

Settling on a balance between a teacher-led dictatorship and student-led chaos, I facilitated (Cremata, 2017; Watson, 2011; Higgins & Bartleet, 2012) modern band ensembles that included drums, ukuleles, guitars, electric bass guitars, keyboards, technology and vocals. Two children sometimes occupied the drum kit while I found that I could accommodate three at a single keyboard. Students would ask questions such as, 'can I play the ukulele?' and 'can I get a chance to try to the electric guitar this time?' My answer was usually, 'of course!' because I believed that each student had the right to make music in the way they saw fit, and to enjoy themselves while doing so in a low-stress environment, free of judgement. It would have been impossible for me to sit with each student or even with each group of instrumentalists with the limited time I had each day, so began my enculturation into facilitating peer mentoring. I delegated the more experienced members of the group to help the lesser experienced, and so the cycle began. A Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998) was created with students who had a shared desire to accomplish something together. The peer mentoring and

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[1] In the United States, the term 'urban' implies a more densely populated city, often including high rates of children who are eligible for free or reduced lunch rates due to familial financial hardship. Middle schools in America are home to students with an average age range of 10 to 15 years.

peer learning that occurred during rehearsals and performances may have greatly impacted the success of the group on both social and musical levels.
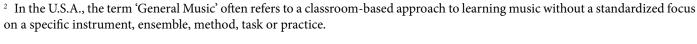
I celebrated with my class when we came close to sounding like a popular song that the students were attempting to play; this was 'approximation' – one of the key tenets of an M.S.L. approach to music learning or acquisition (Powell & Burstein, 2017, p. 245). Approximation was a critical component of my music classes, meaning that students attempted to play popular songs with varying degrees of accuracy in terms of replicating the original. Approximation meant that it was important for me not to focus on the wrong or inaccurate, but rather to applaud and celebrate the good. If a student was attempting, for instance to play an E minor chord on guitar, but was not sounding every single note, they were still playing music. Similarly, if a student was missing the third degree of the D major chord they were attempting on the keyboard, I did not stop a rehearsal to address it. Some ensemble directors might argue against the merits of such an approach for the sake of musicality, refinement and potential award competitions, but I never planned on entering competitions, seeking awards or measuring my classes against some objective plumb line.

'Wait, wait, wait, can you play that for the class? I think some of those notes were wrong'. *'Hold on everyone, let's wait for the ukuleles to fix their part and then we'll try it again'*. I have heard these phrases as an onlooker and participant in countless other ensemble rehearsals, but I never used them in modern band classes. When it came to having fun, the 'affective filter' concept was a key component – embracing learning at a low anxiety level for each student. While I was not aware of that term or its origins in Krashen's Language Acquisition Theory (Krashen, 1981; 1982) until more recently, it was noticeably at play in my classroom since training with Little Kids Rock. Awareness of the affective filter kept me conscious of the need for an educational environment where students felt comfortable to experiment, express themselves and be vulnerable at an age where vulnerability could be construed as the one trait to avoid for fear of embarrassment and ridicule.

Times that I asked a student to play something in front of the class were few. Only when I had observed consistent success would I ask a student to display their progress for everyone else in a way that excited them and their peers to refine their skills and reach further in their ability. What happened most of the time was me walking around the room, with ninja-like stealth and caution, making minor alterations to incorrect notes, positioning, technique and awareness. A small suggestion here or there with a slight adjustment once in a while kept each student at occupied and engaged, feeling like it was not a monumental failure or embarrassment to make a slight correction to what they were attempting to play.

During the rehearsals of a before-school modern band group, the rocking intensified. I fondly remember two groups of students who became like family to one other. One claimed she would have transferred to another school if it had not been for modern band. Others said that the bonds they made as friends would have never happened if not for that opportunity. Still others told me it was the greatest part of their middle school experience. For these students, 'adolescence [was] a developmental period accompanied by significant environmental, physiological, cognitive, and neurobiological changes' (Rith-Najarian, McLaughlin, Sherida, & Nock, p. 193, 2014). The students involved in modern band helped each other musically and also became closer socially.

I utilized modern band as a substitute for the great unknown facing music educators – 'General Music'[2]. I might as well have called my initial approach, 'Your Teacher's Favorite Music', 'Music Theory, History, Rhythm and the Textbooks I feel Compelled to Use', or 'Let's Learn Random Things about Music'. Instead of teaching kids *about* music, modern band gave me the outlet to have 25 to 30 students *play* music. With ukuleles, guitars, a bass guitar, keyboards, voices and a drum kit, the possibilities became endless when it came to learning popular music that the students identified with, loved and cared about. It quickly became apparent to and me and my colleague that modern band and the M.S.L. approach could be used with our more traditional ensembles. Concert band and choir concerts became integrated with modern band when the use of a drum kit, guitars, ukuleles, keyboards and bass guitars supplemented the more traditional instrumentation for both ensembles. When the concert band played 'My House' by FloRida, and "We Found Love" by Rihanna followed by the choir performing Bruno Mars's 'Just the Way You Are' and 'Riptide' by Vance Joy, the influence of Modern Band had clearly spread.

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[2] In the U.S.A., the term 'General Music' often refers to a classroom-based approach to learning music without a standardized focus on a specific instrument, ensemble, method, task or practice.

Modern band is a term that implies the adoption of an evolving vernacular or popular culture that does not stand still for any generation, regardless of how much one might try to hold it still. Through progressive ensemble pedagogy reliant upon the adoption of methods uncommon to historical teaching practice, counting the students' opinions as valid, and considering innovation tantamount to training, modern band and MSL defined a decade of my work in an urban middle school and the formative school experience of some of my students.

Example of practice: Kenrick Wagner, hip hop teaching artist

I know I can be what I wanna be!
And if I work hard at it, I'll be where I wanna be!

This is a call-and-response chant that one can hear along the hallway from a classroom full of energetic music makers. For me, it is the sound of freedom and a clear indication of music educators responding to the voices of young people through a student-centered music making experience. It is of no surprise that hip hop is now 'pop' (mainstream popular music), since it is arguably the most culturally relevant genre of music in classrooms across the U.S.A. Hip hop music education is now a key element to building collaborative, innovative and socially responsive communities.

As a hip hop scholar and youth development specialist, I find it particularly interesting that in the majority of music classrooms that I have walked into, students practice music from composers who are not only absent from the radio or young people's online playlists today, but who were making music in a time when many of the challenges faced by people were vastly different fromthose faced today. If music is an expression of true life experience, how do music educators empower young people to use their voices on the platforms that are available in the 21st century? I provide one possible answer, below, by walking readers through an example of a hip hop modern band program.

A beginning hip hop modern band class starts with a circle of students with a backing track playing softly in the background while the facilitator asks them to freestyle about their names, where they are from, and their eye color. The facilitator uses a simple, call-and-response format, asking the questions over the beat while the other music makers respond with the 'answer', for example, 'my name is [e.g., Leslie], I'm from [e.g. Wisconsin], and my eye color is [e.g. blue]. Students merely have to 'fill in the blanks' and they have begun rapping before the facilitator explains what it even is (maintaining a lower affective filter for those who may be more anxious). Wethen briefly discuss the four main components that comprise hip hop modern band music: confidence, beats, lyrics and 'flow'or 'cadence'. Throughout theclass we delve a little bit deeper into what those components mean and how we can access basic tools to create them.

The lesson continues with an ice-breaker activity; this'hip hop mingle' includes all music makers standing up, walking around and giving one another 'high fives' or shaking hands while a hip hop backing track plays. Once the music stops, music makers freeze and then group together by,for instance, their favouite color, ice cream or fruit. This activity enables the facilitator to get a feel of the personalities in the room, and allows participants to find other commonalities that help them bond and build a little confidence.

To warm up vocals and help build confidence, I play a hip hop hook or chorus and perform again in a call-and-response format with the young music makers. Moving into hip hop beats and production, we start a 'circle up', similar to a drum circle,in which young music makers use their fists as a 'boom' and the open palm as a 'bap' to try sequences back and forth with each other and the facilitator while giving space for improvisation and solo performances. This is an easily affordable activity for creating hip hop sounds organically and for incorporating development of team building. I like to follow the hip hop drum circle with a 'listening party' that includes accessing social media outlets like SoundCloud where aspiring producers share free hip hop backing tracks for all to use at no cost. This is an accessible, easyway for music makers to find instrumentals over which to write lyrics without the hassle of using expensive, complicated technology to produce hip hop beats, which to many can be intimidating and off-putting.

Following our tour through beats and instrumentals, we begin working on lyrics and flow through the 'rap scheme', a technique aimed at encouraging music makers to improvise, compose, and perform without writing or worrying about rhyming. With the group in circle formation, the facilitator shouts out over a backing track

a subject or category (e.g., numbers, colors or fruits – tying in to the earlier icebreaker activity, the hip hop mingle) and music makers take turns shouting out the first thematically related words that come to mind, in rhythm with the backing track. This activity also works well with students in pairs or in other small groupings; the aim is to continue curating the low-stress experience for music makers to begin freestyling. These activities facilitate confidence and ease among participants, as individuals and the collective become comfortable vocalizing over music. The final rap performing activity in this class is the 'rap talk', in which no topic or theme is prescribed, and participants are asked to simply have a conversation over the beat, about whatever comes to mind – what people typically call 'small talk' or just 'conversation' in everyday life is essentially all rap talk without a beat. The fun that young music makers can have in this way is inspiring to witness as an educator, and it can be empowering for young people to realize that they have voice, that they can rap.

So far in the type of class described, students produce music, improvise and compose lyrics, to begin find their flow over a beat and have access to many free and affordable resources to help them in the music making process. A final piece of the classroom hip hop puzzle is to explore extant lyrical content in commercial hip hop. Music teachers can face obstacles and sometimes obstruction in regard to the language or subject matter of many recent and current hip hop songs, and in trying to replicate or simulate them. To help overcome these difficulties, an educator-facilitator can help young music makers come up with solutions for creating friendly hip hop music in line with expectations of the music making community in their school (including parents, principal, fellow teachers, and other stakeholders). A useful activity here is the hip hop rewrite, in which participants take the lyrics of a popular song with which the music makers listen are familiar, and seek answers to the question: 'How can we change some of the lyrics of this song to create a new song that is safe for our music-making community?'

Clean-edited tracks can be found on YouTube simply by typing in the title of a song with "radio edit" added to the search term. Little Kids Rock's modern band hip hop curriculum also includes a list of 75 hyper-linked tracks for all trained teachers to access. For this exercise, the facilitator track plays a track, with the lyrics on the Smartboard or projector screen, minus the curses and other words or phrases problematic in the context of that community. Students are given 10 to 15 minutes (or as long as the task requires) to rewrite the lyrics so that they sound and feel safe within the classroom environment. Students are given no instructions on what words should be used to replace the original lyrics, but should observe the rule that the resulting rap must be in line with the expectations of the community in that classroom and as agreed by the teacher and group together.

6. Conclusions

The above examples provide snapshots into the praxes of two educators working with the powerful medium of music in the emotionally and politically charged arena of public education in the United States. In these examples and in thousands of other instances across the country, 'not only are children cultural reproducers, but… they are also active musical producers' (Linton, 2015, p. 306). The ethos and work of Little Kids Rock and its burgeoning community of teachers across the U.S. are thus aligned with Elliott, Silverman, & Bowman's pursuit of 'instructional practices with compelling transformative possibilities, practices designed to make the world more just and equitable and improve people's lives' (2016, p. 12).

Traditional school music education, along with education more widely, helps to perpetuate inequities and inequalities in an American society divided along lines of race and class (Horsley, 2015). Scholars understand the value of culturally responsive music education experiences and the profound impact these can have in people's lives. In student-centered programs such as those provided through modern band and through learning approaches like M.S.L., 'children are no longer passive agents in relation to the musical culture of the classroom. Instead, they are active agents, creating, interpreting and reproducing their own unique musical cultures alongside the teacher' (Linton, 2015, p. 311). Linton goes on to say that, 'perhaps through the shifting of traditions within the music classroom, these young students can participate in reshaping the musical landscape with the school setting. It may be possible to change children's perceptions of what it means to be a "musician"' (2015, p. 311). The need for change is pressing, and there are palpable potential and momentum towards achieving it.

Modern band classes and M.S.L. pedagogy are not a panacea for the ills of a society and education system deliberately engineered to elevate the wealthy and the white, to disempower the citizenry and to 'miseducate'

(Reay, 2017) the poor and the vulnerable. However, if we conceive of mass education as a public good, capable of and intended for empowering citizens of democratic society (as these authors do), the modern band music programs and M.S.L. pedagogy of Little Kids Rock arevaluable pieces of a jigsaw puzzle for making education and educational opportunities more equitable. We know that:

If we wish to change the nature of education from reproduction to emancipation – aimed at freedom and equity for those at the less privileged end of society, we must listen to their musical voices. Hopelessness and alienation result if we do not – if they feel ignored. When we allow students' musics into our classes, we empower them to have voice and to be heard. (Wright 2018b)

Little Kids Rock helps teachers to help students believe in themselves – to believe that they have a voice, that their voice is worth hearing, and that their contribution is valued by others, including those in authority. What Little Kids Rock begins in its music classes, educators, administrators and policy makers must continue to take to local, regional, state and national governments, for 'it is essential to advance… oppositional political and pedagogical social formations… to preserve and advance social justice, egalitarianism, political tolerance, cultural diversity, and vibrant democracy-centered community' (Giroux 2018, 33). Music teachers can change the world – both through our actions and our inaction. There has never been a greater urgency to create the conditions for transforming lives than right now.

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