Re-framing and Re-defining Deaf Music Education

SUMMER CRIDER

For a long time, Deaf people have had a complicated relationship with music and historical records show that many Deaf children struggle with the music curriculum emphasized in Deaf schools. This paper explores that relationship and reveals that ethnocentric assumptions that hearing educators impose upon Deaf children in regards to music education. It is the author’s hopes that after identifying the problematic curriculum, under the lens of Critical Pedagogy, one can develop a new curriculum, one that introduces music in a way that Deaf children can access, understand, and appreciate. This paper proposes a Deaf-friendly music curriculum, developed by a Deaf person based on different literature reflecting on what works for Deaf children.

Before a Deaf-friendly music curriculum is introduced, one must take a journey through history beginning in 1848, the year that marks the beginning of music education in Deaf schools. The different theories of critical pedagogy will be embedded in this paper as we read along to help us identify and understand why Deaf students have struggled with music education. Using the lens of Critical Pedagogy, the author presents clear examples of Lakoff’s framing, Friere’s banking concept of education, and McLaren and Leistyna’s resistance. In addition, the author presents different theories of Deaf education: how bilingual/bicultural curriculums assist the development of literacy among Deaf children.

What is music? This question will lead to another which will be answered through the history analysis of music in the Deaf education system: What does music education look like in Deaf schools?
DEFINITIONS AND IDEOLOGIES OF MUSIC AND SOUND

The Deaf lens forces such a fundamental and ontological question, "What exactly is Music?" The Oxford English Dictionary, which represents the common knowledge of our society, defines music as:

1. The art or science of combining vocal or instrumental sounds to produce beauty of form, harmony, melody, rhythm, expressive content, etc.
2. The vocal or instrumental sound produced by practical exercise of the art of music
3. Sounds put together in melodic, harmonic, or rhythmical combination: the music of the wind in the pines.
4. Sound produced naturally which is likened to music in being rhythmical or pleasing to the ear, as the song of birds, the sound of running water, etc.

Notice that 'sound' is mentioned in each definition, this may suggest that one must have access to sound to understand music. Many Deaf people do not have adequate access to sound, thus they challenge this definition of music, which are based in sound—just as sound was thought to be similarly tied to language, through speech. Pamela Wright-Meinhardt (2002) declares that it is silly to believe the inability to hear produces the inability to be inspired by sounds. “The organ of the ear is a small compartment of a whole, not the whole of a person. Millions of nerves race through a body; what’s to say a few in the ear destroy a person’s ability to understand music?” Because Deaf people are minorities that live in a world that is dominated by sound, it is important to recognize hearing constructions of sound and silence, for these have a great impact on Deaf people’s concept of sound and music.

There is a misconception among hearing people that Deaf people live in a soundless world and that is portrayed by the metaphor of "silence.” For hearing people, the metaphor of silence, Padden and Humphries (1988) have mentioned, depicts “what they believe to be the dark side of Deaf people, not only an inability to use sound for human communication, but a failure to know the world directly.” This message conveys the meaning that sound is an essential object for survival. Hearing people’s constructions of deafness and Deaf people as “silent” reveals the fact that sound has been valued by hearing people for a long time; the world, for them, becomes known through sound. Padden and Humphries (1988) also point out that for hearing people “sound is a comfortable and familiar means of orienting oneself to the world. And its loss disrupts the way the world can be known.” So the thought of not being able to hear is unacceptable, and in some ways, unthinkable.
What kind of influence does this framing have on Deaf people? The very concept that they are viewed as a group of people, whose connections to the world are disrupted, has made members feel at a loss. The metaphor has trickled down to Deaf people themselves, because the term “silence” is used by Deaf people in nineteenth century periodicals (The Silent Worker and Silent World), and there are still newspapers and Deaf clubs today with the word silence as part of their names. This metaphor is also used predominantly in literature and films about Deaf people. This is an excellent example of how we are “framed,” by hearing definitions of sound/silence. We, Deaf Studies scholars, with our knowledge of critical pedagogy, know those frames are wrong; however, we are aware with the fact that those frames also difficult to remove. Lakoff (2004) explains why: “People think in frames... To be accepted, the truth must fit people’s frames. If the facts do not fit a frame, the frame stays and the facts bounce off.” These dictionary definitions of music, sound, and silence has made it difficult to remove the frames and the negative connotations associated with them. We shall see many more examples of framing as we continue.

It is necessary to understand the term, ideology, as it is a fundamental term to be able to identify problems with the education system through the lens of Critical Pedagogy. Ideology, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is an “orientation that characterizes the thinking of a group or nation,” but in the field of Culture Studies, it is when a group of people believe in a system often enforced by people in power. Keep in mind as we read along, how people in power have spread their ideology in the education system and thus, influencing the pedagogy of Deaf students. We shall look at a case where differences among bodies plays a factor in shaping the way people think about music and sound. Joseph Straus (2008) challenges the ideology of listening to music by looking at outcomes from music cognition research.

The selected subjects, he discovers, are usually undergraduate student at a research university in the US, they are “homogenous not only in age and class, but also in embodiment and ability.” He argues against this methodology, saying participants are selected because of their “normal embodiment” and are taken as “representative of human beings in general.” He goes further to explain what’s wrong with the picture: “We exclude people whose physical or intellectual differences impinge on their cognition of music, including, for example, listeners who are autistic, hearing impaired, or visually impaired.” In this case, Disability Studies show that people with disabilities repudiate and re-define widespread concepts of the body that are created by mainstream culture and society. This, again, re-visits the concept of framing and how people with disabilities have pointed out the errors in “research” and standardized thinking. But how have Deaf people taken
control and pointed out the errors in the education system? They do it by revealing and exposing the examples of ethnocentric assumptions imposed on the curriculum.

**ETHNOCENTRIC ATTITUDES OF HEARING PEOPLE**

Education is a form of transferring values to another person through teaching based on one's experience. Hilde Haualand (2008) summarizes an paternalistic form that hearing people impose on Deaf people in the education system:

> Hearing people's quest for “integrating” or “including” Deaf people might be based in their auditive sense of belonging because this is their embodied way of making relations. Their attempts to “include” Deaf people and make Deaf people hear same too often results in oppression of the Deaf-embodied ways of perceiving, mapping, and learning about the world.¹²

The summary above shows evidence of ethnocentrism, or the tendency to judge other culture by the standards of one’s own, of hearing people. It does not matter whether hearing people intend to “help” Deaf people connect to music, forms of ethnocentrism are prevalent in the American society.

Ethnocentric thinking is one of the dangers in the field of education, especially when it involves “teaching the exceptional and culturally different” because the “ultimate goal... is to remediate deficiencies.”¹³ McLaren (2007) advises how to be aware of the process of being critical with what is being “taught” in the education system. It is when people discover that each institution (political, economic, etc) has its own ideological agendas. “Critical pedagogy is fundamentally concerned with understanding the relationship between power and knowledge. The dominant curriculum separates knowledge from the issue of power and treats it in a unabashedly technical manner.”¹⁴ In other words, it is basically an analyzing process of the ideology of those in power. A great start to analyze the ideology is to look at history and “instruments of power.”

History suggests that language is a powerful instrument of domination.¹⁵ Previously language was thought to be sound-based, through speech, and this kind of thinking had a great influence on Deaf people’s education. A glimpse into Deaf History and the Deaf education system can give us a better understanding of how the spoken English language and hearing values of music has influenced the music curriculum in Deaf schools.
Historical documents and records on sign language and Deaf people reveal a long and complicated history of ethnocentric assumptions on language. Dating back to approximately 400 B.C., records showed that hearing people have speculated on the language of the deaf.^{16} It wasn’t until late nineteenth century, when science and medicine emerged as a powerful institution, hearing people became interested in establishing a standard method for educating Deaf children.^{17} Oralism, or the practice of teaching Deaf children to speak, can be seen as a cultural marker where the message that speech and sound as the only forms of expression is introduced. The natural language of the deaf, sign language, seemed to reflect the “uncivilized” language and thus was oppressed. H-Dirksen Bauman explains this notion: “Historically, we humans have identified ourselves as the speaking animal; if one cannot speak, then he or she is akin to human in body but to animal in mind. In this orientation, we see ourselves as becoming human through speech.”^{18} Because value was given to speech and hearing, the importance of music was emphasized in Deaf schools and Deaf education programs.

**MUSIC EDUCATION IN THE EARLY 1900S**

The earliest account of music education for deaf children was written in 1848 in the *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* by a hearing man.^{19} David E. Barlett, an educator for the deaf who was hired to instruct music, recorded his discovery while teaching the deaf girl how to play the piano:

> It is interesting here to observe how the senses sympathize and cooperate with each other in communicating intelligence to the mind from the material circumstances that surround it, and what a rich field of metaphysical observation is opened in connection with the inquiry: *how*, and *how far* the ideas of time and tune, or rhythmical and poetical expression, can be acquired by persons quite bereft of hearing.^{20}

Barlett, who was inspired by this progress, wrote that definite “intellectual gratification and cultivation was inevitable when music was taught to the deaf.”^{21} W.W. Turner, who was the principal of the American Asylum for the Deaf (ASD) during that time, teamed with Barlett to speak about the “meritorious qualities of music instruction for deaf children” at various schools for the Deaf across the nation.^{22} This presentation introduced the idea to the field of American Deaf Education.

By the 1920s the trend of music use was well established, both in schools and in the community. More emphasis was placed on music, dancing and gymnastic displays. “New York School for the Deaf at Fanwood and Ten-
nessee Schools for the Deaf both had military bands actually playing music instruments; the Florida school had a drill group; and at the Illinois School students were taught how to perform sword dances and the Sailors’ hornpipe.23 The use of music in the early 20th century had served many purposes in Deaf education, and the educational benefit towards Deaf children was mixed. Literature in The Silent Worker, the periodical of the Deaf community, reveal a lot of clashing opinions from both deaf and hearing people upon the trend of music education.

PIANOS ARE NOT ENTERTAINMENT

The Silent Worker published an excerpt of a San Francisco Chronicle article which explained music for the deaf as the latest innovation made by the city’s Board of Education. After reading this article, the superintendent at Berkeley school for the Deaf bought pianos to be placed in every classroom of the school. The reaction from The Silent Worker was a “smile” at the notion that pianos were not the best instrument to teach music to the deaf. The Deaf author wrote:

We would advise the board of education... to buy a good snare drum, and thus save lots of money. Whatever educational value is imagined to come from vibrations would probably be more noticeable in the case of a drum, insomuch as the vibrations of the drum are more perceptible to the deaf.24

Another article from a later issue of The Silent Worker, was more overt in the resistance of this teaching method. Allan, a deaf columnist, criticized the instructor’s tendency to choose bright pupils (those who could hear) to compose or engage in musical activities, and exclude the profoundly deaf. He gave an illustration of a girl obediently listening with no expression on her face, her ear against the piano. The image and captions under that cartoon portrayed his disapproval. The captions read: “We firmly refuse to drape our anatomy on a piano, our head resting negligently on the remote keys to ‘listen to the music.’”25

THE RESISTANCE AGAINST TEACHING ORDER

Drums became incorporated as an instrument in the curriculum of many Deaf schools, however, its purpose was not solely for entertainment. In a special edition of The Silent Worker, titled “Rhythm Number,” a music educator at the New York School for the Deaf wrote: “I am convinced that practically all the pupils of the New York school enjoy and profit educationally by the music vibrations used there.”26 But in 1921, Allan wrote a criticism of
this militaristic method, questioning its validity upon the education of Deaf students: “Is band an unconscious accomplice to a lesson in department? Do militaristic vibrations tend to impart a soldierly stride and bearing incompatible to a stampede to the table?” Educators for the deaf did not encourage Deaf students to play most accessible instrument, rather used this instrument as the instrument for command and order.

These two cases are one of the many examples of the resistance resulting from oppression, as shown in our readings of Critical Pedagogy. Similar to Leistyna’s (1999) introduction to the concept of racenicty, or “the process through which the socio-historical and ideological construction of race has had a significant impact on defining national identity, ethnicity...” This concept leads to the production of resistant/oppositional behavior. Similarly, McLaren (2007) explores racial stratification and politics of culture, helping us understand why students fail. He says that often people in power blame the victims for the failure, instead of wondering what they did wrong in their teaching. McLaren also says there is defiance. “Students are not merely passive victim, they actively contest the hegemony of the dominant culture through resistance.” We can compare this with how Deaf authors have challenged music education in several examples of The Silent Worker, they resist the idea because the music education was based on hearing assumptions of how music should be perceived.

**SPEECH DEVELOPMENT AND BANKING CONCEPT**

There is an extensive literature on the uses of music with deaf children in relation to their “problems of speech, muscular coordination, and rhythm movement.” Another use of music was for oral education, “musical vibrations as an aid in developing the voices of the deaf.” A Fanwood pupil, Lena Herschleifer, wrote an essay in The Silent Worker expressing how she believed music had helped her improve her articulation: “I, although congenitally deaf, can sing a little. If I continue to practice faithfully, I believe that I can sing so that hearing people will enjoy it.” Just like how speech teachers have encouraged Deaf children to “speak” with their “good deaf speech,” the musical training may have resulted in confusion for many Deaf graduates when they discover that their deaf speech was incomprehensible to general hearing people. Alice Terry, a prominent scholar and Deaf woman, observes how profoundly deaf people when “left to themselves...would hardly tamper with vocal or instrument music, unless...” She mentions the annoying ethnocentric assumptions that music educators have: “[Music] is urged upon them by relatives, friends, or teachers, who unfortunately are unscientific enough to imagine that the results justify cost in time, money and labor.” She considered music educa-
tion a “waste” because many Deaf children “fail to reap any appreciable pleasure or good from their music education.”

It is evident that years of music education and the cost of time and money involved was not successful and it is apparent that many Deaf students have learned music through the banking concept of education.32 This concept, discussed by Paulo Freire, is an idea that is widely used in the field of Critical Pedagogy. Freire explains that the “banking concept” of education is when “an empty ‘mind’ passively open to the reception of deposits of reality from the world outside.”33 In this situation, teachers are to be the depositors. In the case of music education for the Deaf, teachers deposit rhythmic numbers in their students’ minds to memorize for school performances, mainly for show that the school is doing their job of assimilating them by imposing them the characteristics of the hearing world.34 “Critical pedagogy reveals how those characteristics and practices reflecting the dominant ideology, will potentially facilitate academic achievement in mainstream schools.”35 Clearly, teaching the exceptional and the culturally different is based on an assimilationist agenda. What’s wrong with this kind of teaching is that it doesn’t encourage problem posing (engaging children to learn how to solve problems on their own), but supplying stock answers (giving them answers to memorize). In this situation, Deaf children are oppressed to learn things that they may never be skilled at, for example, how to speak and hear like their oppressors.

It is no wonder why Deaf people have a complicated relationship with music, the literature reveals how hearing constructions of sound and music has influenced Deaf people to have pejorative connotations and relationship with music. Hearing people have been interested in music education for deaf students for a long time. Alice-Ann Darrow (1993), who has written on the topic of music and Deaf people in a numerous of Music Journals, notes that there are no entries on this topic written by Deaf people themselves, unless they were responding to the music education methods that are set up by hearing educators. This observation “calls in question the importance of music in the lives of deaf individuals, and underscores the notion that hearing are speaking for the deaf, perhaps erroneously, regarding this importance and value of music in educational programs for the deaf.”36

MUSIC EDUCATION IN THE 1990s

Would a different generation of Deaf children have a better experience with music education if music was not stressed as an normalizing enterprise? What would music education in the Deaf community look like after half a decade of trial and error? Our answer is shown in a record from Gallau-
det University, students had mixed reactions when it was announced that
music classes would be offered in the fall of 1988. Some members of the Gal-
laudet community supported this idea, but others "were disconcerted and
believed that it was one more example of 'hearing' values being imposed on
the deaf." In a University of Kansas study about music education programs
for deaf students, it is discovered that cultural identification is a major fac-
tor in deaf individuals' involvement with music. The conclusion of this study
was that music has important role in the education of most deaf students.
It was stressed that there was a high number of students who come from
Deaf families or went to Deaf schools whom did not feel music was impor-
tant to them. What Darrow seems to imply in her conclusion is the fact
that music will never have its niche in the culture of those who profoundly
defain. If music did have a role in deaf culture, it is "considerably more limited
than in hearing culture."

If hearing people had provided access to music through sign language,
by interpreting the lyrics, would Deaf people have a better relationship with
music? We see an answer for that in the early 1990s, soon after the Deaf Pres-
ident Movement. Deaf activists have begun to challenge hearing people's
interpretation of music, especially when it comes to signing English-based
and acoustic-based songs. During the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf
(RID) Conference in 1992, M.J. Bienvenu, the former co-director of The
Bicultural Center, decided to "stop the music" when a hearing entertainer
gave a performance containing signing songs in ASL. The hearing people at
the conference accused Bienvenu of being rude and this situation created a
hot debate in many Deaf community periodicals, including The Silent News
and The Bicultural Center (TBC) News, and people who wrote letters regard-
ing this issue represent a broad spectrum of the Deaf community. Bienvenu
wrote what had compelled her to take a stand:

"Song interpretation is not a bicultural thing. It is very oppressive to the Deaf
community. Often the signs are unintelligible and do not make any sense
to Deaf people, and many feel it is disrespectful to see our beautiful ASL
misrepresented on stage."

Song signing, although it may appear as a beautiful combination of visual
and acoustic pleasure for hearing people, was an eyesore for many Deaf peo-
ple. One of the three questions brought up in the "Stop the Music!" section
of the December 1992 issue of The Silent News was "Is music, even when
interpreted, an appropriate form of entertainment for deaf people?" This
controversy within the Deaf community reveal many themes shown in Cri-
tical Pedagogy and the struggle of the Deaf education system. First, the con-
troversy is an obvious example of divide and conquer. Second, Deaf leaders
are faced with negative framing when they try to clarify that interpreted music does not provide entertainment. And third, assuming that “song signing” provides access to both Deaf and hearing people parallels to hearing educator’s beliefs that simultaneous communication works.

The history and research presented brings attention to the complicated relationship Deaf people have with music, especially when it is imposed on them. Perhaps, if there was more emphasis on the music itself rather than on its role as a subsidiary therapy or education tool, the results would be different. Many Deaf people have shown that music has a different meaning for them and thus, re-frame the way Deaf people perceive and enjoy music.

ADJUSTING THE MUSIC CURRICULUM

As Deaf Studies scholar, Larry Fleischer termed it, “Deaf education is like a fortress... where Deaf studies and Critical Pedagogy theorists need to break in.”

We can break in by using the power of framing. Framing, George Lakoff (2004) says, “is about getting language that fits your worldview. It is not just language. The ideas are primary and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas.” Lakoff breaks down the ways conservatives have framed issues and provide examples of how progressives can reframe the debate. How has conservatives succeeded with getting media power and framing effectively? Lakoff explains that they had “figured out the importance of framing, and they figured out how to frame every issue. They figured out how to get those frames out there, how to get their people in the media all the time.”

Deaf Studies should start following some of Lakoff’s suggestion and begin by seizing the frame and controlling it on our own.

As it is clear in the history presented above, sets of assumptions have been framing Deaf people and Deaf education for a long time. Research about Deaf people, for a long time, does not really reflect us as a group of people. The master narrative, the conclusions made by hearing people, has caused more harm than good. We need to do more counter-narratives, thus, I propose that Deaf people work together to develop a music curriculum based on the Deaf way of experiencing music.

Similarly to how hooks analyzes minorities, color, race, and gender under the lens of Critical Pedagogy, we have analyzed the construction of deafness in the eyes of those in power, those who control the curriculum of many Deaf education programs. hooks mentions something important for us to remember: “Revolution of values would enable us to live differently.” And she quotes Martin Luther King, Jr. “To have peace on earth... our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation.”

It is true if the value of hearing music were shifted to the value of education that
embodies Deaf children, we would have peace and harmony on earth.

Abbe de L'Epée (1776) writes in *The True Method of Educating the Deaf, Confirmed By Much Experience*:

This [book] will show, as clearly as possible, how to go about bringing in through the window what cannot come in through the door; namely, to insinuate into the minds of the deaf through the visual [and tactile] channel what cannot reach them through the auditory channel.⁴⁶

As L'Epée suggests, what cannot be brought through doors (hearing), can be brought through the windows (sight and touch). Although sound is accessible to Deaf people through vibrations of rhythm, sign language can also serve as a medium for bringing visual rhythm through the “window,” the eyes. The “father of Deaf education” has brought up are possible venues we should explore to identify the elements to help us design a Deaf-friendly music curriculum.

Even though there are many flaws that we've noticed in the music curriculum for Deaf students, we shouldn't give up or throw away the curriculum but instead try to embody the curriculum to fit the sensory experiences of Deaf people. Research on music education in classrooms for both hearing and deaf students has shown that when music is presented in the classroom, students benefit greatly.⁴⁷ Based on what we've learned from the oppressive history of music education, how can we learn from it and do differently? We may need to expand our understanding of music and how it can be experienced through a “Deaf” lens. I suggest we begin by looking at the venues in which Deaf people have access to music and create indigenous form of music.

**ENDNOTES**

1. Underlines of sound is the author's emphasis.
3. When hearing people identify Deaf people as silent, they are mistakenly assuming that Deaf people have no concept of sound, that sound plays no part in their world, or if it does, their ideas about it are deeply distorted. Padden, Carol. & Humphries, Tom. 1988 & Deaf In America: Voices From a Culture, 94.
4. Padden & Humphries, Deaf In America, 93.
5. Ibid, 93.
8. 3/2/09, Critical Pedagogy: M.J. Bienvenu, Gallaudet University. Lecture notes, p.2
10. p. 2, Ibid.
11. Crutchfield & Epstein, 2000; Davis, 2000; Fries, 1997; Haller, 1995. Normal hearing is
hierarchical in nature, as cited in Straus, Normal hearing.

12. Hauland. Open Your Eyes, 120.
15. Fanon 1997; Shabha 1990, 1994 as cited in Revill, Politics of Sound.
16. Plato, Cratylus. 400 B.C.
17. Ironically, the institution of science has also pushed the meaning of the word of music, from a mutli"sensory experience to a oral/aural experience. The Industrial Revolution and Romantic movement had strong influence on how people perceive music. Jamie James, The Music of the Spheres: Music, Science, and the Natural Order of the Universe. %New York: Copernicus Press, 1993&%, 3"5.
19. The earliest substantial and scientifically oriented instance of using music with the deaf recorded is that of Itard, an otologist working in Paris in 1802. He carefully observed the responses of deaf students to the auditory stimulation of bells, a drum, and a guitar.
20. p. 5; Barlett, David. E. in W.W. Turner's article: 1848.
21. Ibid, p. 2
23. Dorothy Miles. #Deaf Theatre Master's Thesis. %Gallaudet University, 1974&%, 15.
24. Silent Worker. %March 1904& Vol. 16, No. 6, 96.
25. Allan. Silent Woker. %April 1921& Vol. 33, No. 7, p. 222
26. Sarah Harvey Porter, as cited in the Silent Worker Rhythm Number edition, %1917&, 107.
27. Allan. iMusic and the Deafs. Silent Worker. %April 1921. Vol. 33, No. 7&, 222
28. Pepi Leystina, Presence of Mind, p. 62
29. Peter McLaren, Life in Schools, p. 228
31. Silent Worker, %1917&, 106.
32. This concept is a critical pedagogical term where students are forced to learn certain subjects because of standardized curriculum.
33. Friere, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 75.
34. Deaf history is where phonocentrism begins institutional arrangements, especially in medicalized educational practices bent on normalizing bodies. Bauman, Essays on Philosophy. %2008&, 4.
36. Darrow, 94.
38. music education, in this sense, was limited to notation, writing music, and analyzing sound properties. There was no real signing or performances involved, so thus, was unpopular among Deaf students with a strong foundation and knowledge in Deaf culture.
39. Darrow, 93
41. From April 1993 issue of the TBC news.
42. Larry Fleischer %2/17/09& Guest speaker, in a Critical Pedagogy class DST 714.
43. Lakoff, George. 2004, Don't Think of An Elephant, 4.
44. Ibid, 16.
45. books, 28.
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Critical Pedagogy Texts


