

2011

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Recommended Citation

Freer, Patrick K., "Protecting Students' Differences: What is Our Responsibility? [From the Academic Editor]" (2011). *Music Faculty Publications*. 13.

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[JUNE 11 MEJ] From the Academic Editor

by Patrick K. Freer, Georgia State University, Atlanta

Protecting Students' Differences: What Is Our Responsibility?

We teach in a democracy, and one of the results is that we teach all children. Each child is unique, with an individual array of characteristics that include physical, musical, cognitive, social, and emotional attributes. We say things like, “I don’t teach music—I teach *children* music.” If that is the case, then we have a responsibility to teach in ways responsive to both children and music. Former MENC President Karl Gehrkens eloquently framed this responsibility when he wrote, “We are to cause boys and girls, first, to continue to like music; second, to grow constantly in appreciation of good performance of good music; and, third, to develop their own powers of taking part in music to the utmost of their ability and interest. Love, appreciation, participation—these three; and, in my opinion, the greatest of these is love” (*Music Supervisors’ Journal*, May 1923, p. 47).¹

The articles selected for this issue of *Music Educators Journal (MEJ)* look at this responsibility from a variety of perspectives. Bruce Carter’s “A Safe Education for All” addresses the problem of student harassment in schools, with specific attention to how music teachers can recognize and respond when bullying occurs in their classrooms and rehearsals. It is anticipated that Carter’s article will continue the national conversation begun in the autumn of 2010 when several high-profile incidents of student bullying and resulting suicides riveted our collective attention. The most recent *MEJ* article to explore the topic of harassment in music classrooms was Louis Bergonzi’s “Sexual Orientation and Music Education” (December 2009), prompting the greatest number of letters to the editor of any article in *MEJ* history. Ryan M. Hourigan also offered resources for teachers seeking to understand the “invisible students,” those who refrain from seeking attention in large performing ensembles due to fear of exposing their perceived differences to other students (June 2009).

The topic of religion’s influence on school music has generated a voluminous quantity of *MEJ* article content. In this issue, Adria Hoffman looks at the impact of religion on diverse groups of students in “Rethinking Religion in Music Education.” Multiple *MEJ* authors have explored the intertwined relationships of spirituality, religion, music, and education. Deane W. Ferme wrote, “if music, like religion, is to remain true to its essence, it must continue to stress the spiritual side of man” (January 1956, p. 26), and the esteemed American composer Howard Hanson wrote of our sacred responsibility to teach toward a “beauty which is timeless and unchanging. The sensitizing of our souls and the souls of our students for the reception of this beauty is our greatest task” (May–June 1935, p. 14).

Since the launching of Sputnik in 1957, most *MEJ* articles dealing with religion have deemphasized philosophical matters and attended instead to practical affairs of repertoire and curriculum. In January 1965, high school choral teacher Donald Meints responded to two recent U.S. Supreme Court cases about the use of sacred texts in public education by asking “Are we violating the Constitution?” and answering, “We are

teaching sacred music, not teaching religion through music, and therein lies the difference” (p. 67). James Scamman’s “Religious Music in the Public Schools” (May 1967) includes text excerpts from these court decisions. Scamman’s article may be of interest to current music teachers who confront similar questions. Readers can find the MENC position statement on “Music With a Sacred Text” at www.menc.org.

Five additional articles in the current issue of *MEJ* concern practical situations that arise from recognizing other types of student differences. These deal with personality variations in ensemble students (Christin Reardon’s “Understanding Your Band, Orchestra, and Choir Students”), differences in learning styles and pedagogical needs (Stephanie Standerfer’s “Differentiation in the Music Classroom,” and how to incorporate differentiation in teaching on a daily basis (Erin Hillier’s “Demystifying Differentiation for the Elementary Music Classroom”).

These and other types of student differences can complicate the exchange of ideas between teachers and students as described in Adria Hoffman’s “Do You Hear What I’m Sayin’?” This issue closes with Kevin Tutt’s “Philosophy + Advocacy = Success,” in which he offers that a music teacher’s curricular and budgetary requests need to stem from the goal of “giving students an education designed to meet their needs and abilities through more varied repertoire and instruction crafted for the participating students.”

If we are to meet the varied needs of our students, ensure the outcomes necessitated by our curriculum, and maintain the utmost of musical integrity, we might do well to consider again the words of Meyer M. Cahn. In his *MEJ* article of April 1949, “Human Relationships in Music Education,” Cahn wrote of our responsibility to guide the developing musicianship of all students: “The road to musical understanding and insight is a long one strewn with obstacles, and only a warm-hearted educator who is skilled in the manipulation of human affairs can safely guide young people along that road” (p. 18).

Note

1. In 1923, MENC was known as the Music Supervisors National Conference, and its flagship publication was the *Music Supervisors’ Journal*.