

MUS 782

Discussion 8 – Oxford Handbook Ch. 16

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This time, in your discussion – include your thoughts about ethics in Education and/or Music Education. Express your understanding of this chapter.

Functionalist sociology states that all societies have structures to fulfill the transmission of attitudes, values, skills, and norms from one generation to the next. These structures are oftentimes called the helping professions, which include medicine, law, therapy, ministry, and teaching. There is an ethical responsibility on these structures to serve and protect those involved in the structure: patients, clients, parishioners, and students. As music educators, we must be constantly aware that we are teaching students, not music.

Ethical responsibility is often overlooked in education for music educators because there is an assumption that music is good. Therefore, if educators provide music experiences, their program is good. But there is much more to making a music program effective and ethical. This chapter discusses key elements of ethics to make music programs ethical and teachers the most professional they can be. Ethics and morals are seen by many as synonyms, but here the authors use ethics, since morals are more closely related to religious premises.

The three formal ethical theories discussed in this chapter include duty, consequentialist, and virtue ethics. Duty ethics is concerned with following standards of ethical conduct, largely adhering to the concept of rights (civil rights, human rights, animal rights). Since it is largely defined as something that “ought to be done” teachers can get by with just offering instruction, whether or not it produces any learning. Relating to music then, duty ethics requires teachers to provide functional benefits to and advance the musical functioning of their students. Some guidelines include:

1. The service should benefit the students, not the teacher. Teachers should not be concerned with glory/attention to “their” program. The program should be catered to the students, instead of expecting the students to fit into a cookie-cutter mold. The music program is obligated to provide for the needs of all students, regardless of the number of students interested in a certain venture (i.e. schools should offer orchestra as an ensemble as well even if only a handful of students want to pursue that).

2. Music programs should “do no harm” – meaning that students must improve during the instruction or their growth as a musician has been harmed.

3. Students have a right to be safe – applies to physical abuse obviously, but also psychological harassment, manipulation, or harm. Some teachers wrongfully employ strong-arm tactics like embarrassment, bullying, belittling, and intimidating. Having challenges/auditions for chair placement can give strong students the idea that winning is the end goal, while simultaneously crushing the weaker students from ever trying.

4. Music programs must be fair and just, serving all students equally rather than singling out a small exceptionally talented group and ignoring the rest. Follow-up should be done to ascertain why an individual left the band program, rather than rejoicing that the student is gone. Hidden curriculum occurs when a teacher neglects certain music genres, which can lead students to believe that omitted areas are unacceptable by culture as a whole.

5. Another traditional duty is beneficence (mercy, kindness) to the needy. This means that students’ individual needs must be determined and then met, instead of each student being treated the same with the same approach to music education.

6. Basic concepts of human rights involve allowing and promoting free expression. Music educators find it difficult to follow this since most work is done in large ensembles, for which the educator must choose the group pieces. More attention can be paid to individuals by having robust solo and small group ensemble programs, which gives students more freedom to choose their own music.

7. Always treat students as individuals/people – never use them as a means to an end for a program or teacher’s desires. An example of this includes selecting an instrument for a student based on the ensemble’s balance rather than on the desire of that student.

The second formal ethics theory is consequentialist ethics, which focuses on goals rather than duties. The consequences of an action determine whether or not it is ethical. Basically, if the outcome is useful for students and contributes to meeting a need, it is ethical. Also, an ethical action is one that “produces the greatest good for the greatest number” as well as enhances well-being, thriving, and musicianship growth. This ethics theory proposes educational instruction as a hypothesis – something to test its effectiveness against the status quo. It is a way to see differences between the benefits promised by the teacher/program and the actual consequences promoted for the musical well-being of students.

The third formal ethics theory is virtue ethics. Instead of focusing on duties or anticipated results, virtue ethics is more concerned with the personal integrity of the agent. Aristotle described two kinds of virtues: ethical and intellectual. Aristotle believed ethical virtue to be inborn or brought about by upbringing. The twelve character traits of ethical virtue include courage, restraint, generosity, dignity, honorableness, proper ambition, patience, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness, modesty, and righteous indignation.

On the other hand, intellectual virtues are based on acquiring knowledge and skill of *theoria*, *techne*, and *praxis*. *Theoria* is active contemplation and inquiry to determine the “goodness” of something. *Techne* is about making things and uses such terms as tools, means, and ends. A case against current music programs falls into this category as being a factory in that they sometimes treat students as interchangeable products on an assembly line. *Praxis* is involved with “doing,” which means the application of knowledge and skills into the service for the population being served (i.e. promoting good or right results to improve the well-being of students).

Include your thoughts about ethics in Education and/or Music Education.

I was happy to see that I’m doing a lot of the ethical things already – I treat my students with respect, get to know them individually, and never try to dominate groups with fear or belittling. I treat all my students equally, while also giving additional materials to students who are excelling beyond the current pace of the group. Thanks to my years as a teacher, I feel I do well to get kids excited about band and increase their musical knowledge and skill.

However, this chapter illuminated questionable things I’ve done during my career without even knowing it – things that do not have an easy fix. As much as I don’t like to admit this, I’ve secretly rejoiced when some particularly difficult students have quit band – I’ve even encouraged it a few times for the betterment of the ensemble as a whole. I’ve told students to choose instruments other than their top choice to help balance the ensemble and improve behavior. How could I not if it meant I’d have 15 percussionists in a 30 piece ensemble? I choose the pieces we will be practicing and performing without input from my students. Though, I do take students’ strengths and weaknesses into account. For example, if a piece is great but requires a strong French horn that I don’t have, I’ll rewrite the horn part for my stellar baritone player. Meeting every student’s desires for a piece of music is impossible – especially with a ratio of me (1) to 220 students. I can’t have individual lessons or solo contests – there is literally no time in my schedule. I think teachers must do the best with the time and resources they’re given. Ethics should always be considered but knowing that we are only one person with limited resources can help cut ourselves some slack.

I've noticed a big difference between my former, affluent suburban school and my current inner-city school. It's a miracle if more than half of the students in a particular class remember their horns and/or know how to hold them. Even the most basic of pieces in the library are unattainable for these kids. This presents a new, unique challenge for me – which is saying something considering this is my 21st year of teaching! I'm playing around with the idea to ask the kids to list their 3 favorite songs – I'm sure it will all be Top 40 (ugh...), not anticipating much classical – and using that to develop short worksheets to teach musical elements. While it will be more work than me, this could be the thing I need to get buy-in from the kids. This idea seems to check off many areas of ethical music programs, so I think it's worth a try.