



STUDYDADDY

Get Homework Help From Expert Tutor

[Get Help](#)

Another Perspective

Re-Placing Music Education

Abstract: The core music education narrative is a powerful story firmly established in the public imagination as well as in the profession. Core narratives develop over time and create a sense of epistemological certainty that is resistant to change. In other words, the power and persistence of a core narrative can become problematic through limiting the kinds of stories that are told and heard. What would it mean to re-frame the core narrative of music teaching and learning and re-place music education into more vibrant, open, collaborative both/and spaces that include more than the place of school?

Keywords: core narrative, curriculum, music education, socialized knowledge, values

Music education in the United States has a powerful core narrative—a central story that frames what “music education” means to the public. A few years ago, while I was in a cab on the way to the airport for a conference trip, the driver and I struck up a conversation. After the usual small talk about airline, terminal, and time of departure, she asked what I did for a living. “I’m a music teacher,” I said. “Oh,” she replied, “my son loves music. He really wants to play an instrument, but there’s not a music program at his school.”

Disappointed with that news, I asked which district and school and was flummoxed when she named them. I knew both the music teacher in the school and the music supervisor for the district. We lapsed into awkward silence as I struggled with how to respond. On one hand, the cab driver was wrong. There was, and is, a thriving music program at her son’s school. On the other hand, she was right, and to be honest, I knew what she meant. What she wanted for her son—what she *expected* based on the core narrative of

music education—wasn’t there. The stories didn’t match. Based on that inconsistency, she had reached the only logical, if incorrect, conclusion: “There’s not a music program.”

The cab driver’s story illustrates one of several tensions in our profession. There are many. So many, in fact, that I’m not writing about any of them specifically here. Rather, I offer one possible explanation of why these tensions exist, how the core narrative of music education perpetuates them, why we continue to wrestle with them, and why that wrestling seems so contested and difficult. I invite you to consider two questions: What if we re-framed the core narrative? What if we re-placed music education?

Core Narratives

Every family has stories it tells, often over and over again. When someone joins the family through birth, marriage, or friendship, the stories are repeated so that the new member can understand what is important to the family, how it thinks, what it does and

We are responsible for the music education core narrative and for the positive changes that may occur with a shift in the public and professional story of music teaching and learning.

Sandra Stauffer is a professor of music at Arizona State University, Tempe. She can be contacted at s.stauffer@asu.edu.

NAfME is glad to offer one hour of professional development credit to you for reading this article. Please follow the link below and complete a short quiz to receive your certificate of completion.

bit.ly/Re-Placing

Copyright © 2016 National Association for Music Education
DOI: 10.1177/0027432116646423
<http://mej.sagepub.com>

when, and how relationships work. Like families, social groups and professions have stories that serve similar functions. The *ideas and meanings* that bind clusters of small stories together, whether for a family or a profession, become its core narrative.

Core narratives are central, often defining ideas or frameworks that have substantial staying power and, usually, considerable history. Individuals have core narratives linked strongly to sense of self. Groups have core narratives comprising socialized knowledge—sometimes passed down as lore—that guide customary practice and define membership. Communication theorists, psychologists, historians, and literary scholars use the concept of core narrative to explain how digitally mediated gaming works, the problems and possibilities of different kinds of psychotherapy, value propositions in commercial advertising and political campaigns, the persistence of historical grand narratives, and literary heroes' tales.¹ Core narratives are powerful and durable. They cannot be untold, and they are tremendously difficult to reframe.

Why? Core narratives develop through the accretion of meanings over time in day-to-day actions and countless small stories. Thus, although core narratives appear to be simple and common-sense, they are usually highly complex ideas woven through with an intricate array of values, truth assumptions, inferences, and a kind of unspoken internal logic. Core narratives work—core narratives *are* core narratives—because they are heuristics for understanding, something taken for granted. They “explain” actions and choices. They create a sense of epistemological closure—a sense of something that “everyone knows” and assumes to be “true.” Some core narratives become broadly held public stories—stories told *about* “the way things are,” even by people who may not be intimately involved in the actions that make up the core narrative.

The “everyone knows” quality of core narrative creates a tremendously challenging paradox. On one hand, core narratives can provide social coherence, free up mental space, and render

some actions intuitive or nearly intuitive, which may be quite useful. For example, “everyone knows” the “rules of the road”—a core narrative about driving in the United States. We perform the action of driving nearly without conscious thought (sometimes at our own or fellow drivers' peril) because we “know” the “how to drive” narrative. In fact, the “how to drive” narrative is so strong that the stories we most likely tell about driving have something to do with how *not* to drive or what happens when things go wrong, which in turns strengthens the “right way” story. If we travel to places where the rules of the road are different from our own experiences, we attend more consciously to the act of driving and may even tell stories about our own ability to adjust (or not!).

Yet, the “everyone knows,” intuitive, “how it is” sense of a core narrative can also present problems. Rancorous debates about value and truth arise when long-held assumptions associated with core narratives are challenged by social, economic, technological, or political change. Tensions also come about when core narratives become intertwined with personal experiences that don't match. Different personal interpretations of “what everyone knows” or assumes about what the core narrative *is* and what it *means* can be surprising and unsettling. Coherence disappears, fidelity is challenged, values collide, and the narrative itself comes into question. Consider the Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States and what “everyone knows” about the “right to bear arms” narrative. Assumptions. Values. Personal stories. Public events. History. Assumptions *about* history. Social, economic, technological, political change. Change? . . . It's difficult.

Music Education's Core Narrative

Music education in the United States has a strong core narrative and a long history that is interwoven with that of the public schools. Most music teachers in the United States are likely at least somewhat familiar with Lowell Mason, the

incorporation of music into the curriculum of the Boston Public Schools in the 1830s, the community singing schools that preceded that event, and the development of music teacher institutes that followed. Mason and his contemporaries—and the music teachers, administrators, publishers, and instrument manufacturers who followed them over the next 180 years—were rather successful. Once established, music education remained in the public schools in some form or the other, and over time, “music education” became *about* music teaching and learning *in* schools. “School” is part of the core narrative of music education in the United States.

In addition to “school,” other powerful meanings have also accrued to the music education core narrative over the past 180 years. For example, “music education” has become strongly associated with public events in which young people demonstrate what they have learned in school, often through large-group performance and often with their teacher leading them from the front or guiding from the sidelines or stage wings. *There is nothing wrong with any of this; there is nothing inherently wrong with concerts or shows, or band or orchestras, or choirs or conductors, or performance or presentational music.* The point here is these actions, actors, and events, repeated so many times so well for so many years, have become inseparable from the idea of *what music education is* in the public imaginary. They *are* the core narrative, and the totalizing power of the core narrative has become problematic.

The music education core narrative is powerful. It is so powerful that the grand experiment of music education as practiced in the United States has been emulated elsewhere.² It is so powerful that it informs public sensibilities about who music educators are, where they can be found, what they do. It is so powerful that the waxing and waning of “music education” with political and economic shifts and education reform movements (a narrative all its own) fuels headlines and blog posts about the “disappearance” of music education, whether it has occurred or not, which in

turn provides fodder for those seeking to fill the gaps.³ So powerful that filmmakers count on “what everyone knows” about music education, music teachers, and even the (apparent) changing fortunes of both to generate plot lines. Consider the films *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, *Music of the Heart*, *School of Rock*, or *Sister Act 2*. A musician (often from the “outside,” because music educators are somehow not there or not doing well) comes to a school in need, a group of students who are floundering, or a place where “suddenly the school budget is cut.”⁴ Some kind of crisis is followed by a musical victory, usually at a competition or concert, where someone or something is “saved.” It’s all, well, so normal, “the way it is,” such a “natural fact”⁵—so well aligned with the music education core narrative.

And that is what the cab driver told me—a small-story version of the music education core narrative. Her son was a fifth-grade student attending a K–5 elementary school in a district that had recently reorganized. As part of that reorganization, the starting year for band instruments had been shifted from fifth grade to sixth grade. Her son wanted to play a band instrument. Their situation aligned well with the core narrative: no band, no music education. Except . . .

One of the problems of a strong core narrative is epistemological closure. Epistemological closure is just that—a sense of closure or certainty because “everyone knows” what “the story” is. This sense of inevitability surrounding core narratives makes it difficult to imagine the possible, to see what else *is* right now and what else *might be* in the future. The sense of inevitability associated with a strong core narrative constrains possibility and renders “different than anticipated” invisible. In other words, the more stable and powerful the core narrative, the more “everyone knows,” the more difficult it is to tell, hear, and see stories, actions, people, and ways that do not seem to “fit.” The more stable and powerful the core narrative, the more difficult it is to take in new ideas. The more stable and powerful the core narrative, the more

difficult it is to recognize it, re-frame it, and imagine other ways of being. Core narratives can get in the way.

That’s why the cab driver was right and why I was so conflicted. Yes, beginning band was no longer available in her son’s elementary school. But there *was* still a music teacher and a thriving general music program in which her son *did* play instruments (percussion, ukulele, guitar) with his peers. There *were* other music teachers in her community who were available to help her son learn to play a band instrument. There *was* a community music school close to her district that provided free lessons. Yet none of these matched the core narrative of music education in the United States—the public story of what “music education” *is*. Because the cab driver “knew” *that* story, other people, other actions, and other possibilities for her son were invisible.

Caught in the Core Narrative

Core narratives gain strength through history, through repetition of actions, through the telling of stories that resemble other “way it is” stories as well as the telling of stories that illustrate what is *not* what “everyone knows.” The more powerful the core narrative *and* the more embedded the teller is in the story, the easier it is to get caught in its web of meanings, sometimes to the point of becoming immobilized.

In January 1978, I began a semester of student teaching in a small suburban school district west of Philadelphia. My mentor teacher for the first eight weeks of the semester was a middle school band teacher who also assisted with the high school band and taught small-group woodwind lessons in an elementary school and a middle school general music class. He suggested that I begin with the general music class, commented that he had promised the students a unit on rock music, and turned the class over to me.

The group of about thirty students met three days a week. Two of those days were over the lunch hour, meaning that the students went to lunch in

the middle of the class time and then returned. The room in which we met was once a large storage closet that had been converted to a classroom because the school population was growing. The equipment allotted was an overhead projector and a sound system on a cart. Not a promising situation.

No matter, I thought. I had taken a secondary general music course in which we had written unit plans, learned how to use VHS cameras and splice audio tapes, and read about world music, electronic music, and popular music. I knew rock music was “okay,” not only because we had talked about it in class but also because during a late-night study session in the library, one of us had discovered that our professor had written a wry letter to the editor of *Music Educators Journal (MEJ)* several years earlier in support of both rock music and the arguments made for the inclusion of rock music in articles in previous issues. His letter was followed by another from a “thoroughly disgusted” reader who claimed that *MEJ* had gone “downhill” and no longer served “the majority of music educators.”⁶

Although I felt confident, I actually knew very little about rock music other than what I heard on the radio. I hadn’t played any rock music on my clarinet and very little on the piano. There was no rock music in the wind ensemble folder, and I hadn’t sung any in choir. Other than the secondary general music course, rock music simply hadn’t come up in any other classes. *MEJ* included nothing about rock music that academic year except a two-page article on Elvis Presley, and by the time it appeared in the March 1978 issue and that issue became available in the library, Elvis had died, and I had left the building.

My university supervisor came to observe on the third day I taught. No one was happy with how things went.

It is easy—almost too easy—to critique that story from any number of cultural, sociological, pedagogical, theoretical, philosophical, and downright practical perspectives. No one should teach in a closet. Everyone should have adequate resources. Who teaches (or schedules) classes with a lunch break

in the middle? There are certainly better ways to mentor student teachers. I lacked content knowledge. My own experiences and history as a musician limited me. The ways I was prepared to teach limited me. I was mired in a banking-deposit model of education. Music appreciation classes pose problems for multiple reasons, including the implied low status of students who may be characterized as “not musically capable or else they would be in an ensemble.”

What I have come to understand, nearly forty years later, was that I was caught in the music education core narrative and that I had learned that narrative very well. So well, in fact, that I didn't recognize it, had no capacity to re-frame it, and no idea that I should. So I offer, now, a different explanation of my own story—one that contrasts old “core narrative thinking” with *re-framing for possibility*.

Forty years ago, I saw the people in the room as “students to be taught about music” instead of *human beings with musical lives and musical interests of their own*. I saw rock music as “content to be learned” instead of *vibrant musical practice*. I considered rock as “something outside of schools that can be analyzed and studied” instead of *music that means something in our lives here and now*. Most important, I was focused on “what I should do to teach these students about music” instead of *who we musical people are and what we can do and become together*. I was so caught in the core narrative that I missed the imaginative possibility that those thirty students were already musical beings in the world.

Re-Framing the Core Narrative, Re-Placing Music Education

Nearly a half-century after debates about rock music in *Music Educators Journal*, nearly forty years after my first stumbling steps into the profession, nearly ten years after John Kratus's “Tipping Point” article,⁷ the music education profession is traveling through

a fascinating time. Authors in previous issues of *MEJ* this academic year have described this time as “our profession's both/and moment”⁸—one full of tremendous potential for multiplicities and “open variation.”⁹ The core narrative of music education is, slowly, shifting. Yes, as enduring as they may be, core narratives are still provisional stories; they *do* change over time, and change can be uncomfortable.

The problem with stories, and one of the reasons change is so uncomfortable, is that stories can't be untold. Re-framed and re-positioned, yes, but not untold. The old core narrative is still around, if not in the minds of the readers of this journal, then certainly in the public imaginary and in the minds of cab drivers, script writers, press reporters, and school and university administrators (even fellow arts educators and musicians), who continue to tell and retell the (partial, incomplete, yet quite public) story: Music education happens in schools where students learn to sing in choirs and play in bands and orchestras that perform at public events. And, even more problematic, some tellers outside the immediate music education field are *very sure* that *this and only this* version of “music education” is true.

We are responsible for the music education core narrative—the one held in the public imaginary. We are responsible for disrupting stories people tell themselves about what music education *is* that may no longer be “true.” To effect the same shift in the *public* story of music education that seems underway in our professional conversations (and to keep our own momentum going) will require conscious and continuous acts of re-framing the narrative and replacing music education. By re-framing, I mean attending to language and symbols, to the ways we write and speak about music teaching and learning to each other and to the world, and to the ways we represent music education through our actions with each other and with the world. By re-replacing, I mean re-locating music teaching and learning not only in the place of schools, where

it seems be stuck, but anywhere people are making music of any kind.

Why re-place and re-frame? The connection between music education and public school is inescapable, largely due to the history of the field. In fact, music education is so strongly tied to the specific place of “public school” that the first two words of the phrase “public school music education” are typically implied rather written or spoken; “public school” seems taken for granted in the core narrative. But prior to (and even after) Lowell Mason's tenure in the Boston Public Schools, music education was about learning in and with the community, and the walls that separated school and community were much more porous than they are today. Over time, the structures of music education have come to resemble the structures of public school so thoroughly that the language used to describe music education mirrors the language of school structures. Once in school, music education became bound to “school” and only school and never left school.

Schools are fine places for music learning, but they are not the *only* places, and places have meanings—local meanings and local stories that include ways people music make, curate music, learn music, hear music, share music well beyond school years and school walls. What are the human consequences when “music education” is tightly bound to the place of school? Who and what becomes invisible or excluded? What might be the consequences of becoming more conscious of and attendant to the ways in which the structures and labels *of* school become attached to and limit music making *in* schools and music making experiences of the human beings who pass *through* schools and out into the world?

To re-frame the music education core narrative and re-place music education means to make a commitment to thinking about the impact of our own habits of speech and rhetorical conventions and what they communicate. Words matter. Language *is* action. Over the past several years, discourse scholars

have provoked thinking about how language has not only rhetorical consequences but political and ethical ones as well. What does the phrase “traditional ensemble” mean, for example, and to whom, and when spoken or written where? How do images and sounds convey meanings about who and what matters in music education? How do small words make huge differences—“music with” rather than “music for”? How can we complicate binaries and craft dialogic spaces that allow for curiosity and questioning, whether speaking with each other or with those who speak about us? Language, like music, is a human transaction. There is no getting it right, only getting it better.

Language is action, *and* action becomes language. Stories are made of the experiences we have. Re-framing or shifting the core narrative and re-placing music education means remaining opening to hearing unexpected stories from speakers who may be unfamiliar and who are as passionate about music and music-making as those who are well known. Re-framing the core narrative means being open to the imaginative possibility of designing new kinds of experiences with familiar actors who may then have new stories to tell. Re-placing music education means being attuned to how the ways in which we interact with each individual enhance that individual’s sense of being a musical person in the world.¹⁰

However the core narrative of music education shifts and evolves in the next five years or five decades, it is unlikely that it will ever be a grand unified tale shared in exactly the same way by everyone everywhere. Core narratives change with the social and political order. Critique of the core narrative is essential; dialectical tensions are inseparable from living in a complex world. Local stories give rise to local interpretations and meanings that may run counter to the core narrative and the epistemological certainty it assumes. As that occurs, the challenge for each of us is to resist the temptation to tame unruly stories or dismiss them as anomalies and instead, to listen more

closely, to ask more questions, and to think more deeply about whose stories (musics, ways of being musical) they are and what those stories mean to the tellers. Place and people matter.

Opening to the Possible

Other interpretations of my own story are possible, no doubt. Other interpretations of the cab driver’s story are possible too, and those deserve equal time, space, and consideration. Other people would likely have responded differently than I did to “there is no music program.” It’s easy to get caught in the rhetoric and habits of core narrative thinking. It’s much more difficult to re-frame the narrative and re-place music education. But what if we did? What if we *do*? What if we *can*, in ways large and small? Every day. What if we lived the changes?

I no longer remember what I said to the cab driver. I recall empathizing with her plight. I remember feeling frustrated that “music education” seemed to mean just one thing and angry that this singular meaning seemed to render “other” musicians and teachers and actions invisible. I remember being stuck at the moment. I admit that I was selfish, in my conference head, thinking more about what her story meant to *me* than what it meant to *her*. I certainly didn’t express sufficient curiosity about her son’s musical interests or hers. I didn’t ask *why* she thought what she thought.

I hope that whatever vagaries I muttered about finding a teacher were useful to her. I hope her son found his way into the next stages of the musical life he wanted and that his mother desired for him. But, hope is never enough. The cab driver knew the old core narrative, and I was not ready, in that moment, to re-frame it and re-place music education in a more vibrant, open, humane, collaborative space. I am now.

“It’s great that your son wants to play an instrument. How did he get interested? Is there a song or some kind of music he wants to play? What does he already do? Yes, it’s too bad that the band program now starts in sixth grade

instead of fifth. Please tell your principal and the school board what you think about that. Do you know whom to contact? I’ll look up the number and write it down. Meanwhile, there *is* a music teacher your son’s school. You’ve probably seen her at one of those evening presentations she does with the students. Has your son been part of those? She might know someone in the community who gives lessons. If she doesn’t, there’s a very fine community music school not far from you. They have free classes and lessons. I’ll find that number for you too. There are some great music groups in your community. Maybe someone in one of those could get him started, or even let him play along. When your son gets to middle school and high school, there are all kinds of music classes and groups, in case his interests change. That happens sometimes, and it’s okay. All musical experiences, at home and at school, are valuable. So what about you? Tell me about your music and your family . . . ”

NOTES

1. See, for example, Anne-Mette Albrechtslund, “Gamers Telling Stories: Understanding Narrative Practices in an Online Community,” *Convergence* 16, no. 1 (2010): 112–24; or H. L. Goodall Jr., *Counter-Narrative* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2010).
2. Robert A. Cutietta, “Pondering the Grand Experiment in Public School Music Education,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education, Volume 2*, ed. Gary F. McPherson and Graham E. Welch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 612–14; and Robert A. Cutietta, “K–16 Music Education in a Democratic Society,” in *Oxford Handbook of Music Education Policy*, eds. Richard Colwell and Patrick Schmidt (forthcoming).
3. Lauren Kapalka Richerme, “Apparently, We Disappeared,” *Music Educators Journal* 98, no. 1 (2011): 35–40.
4. These words appear exactly in the Wikipedia plot summary of the film *Music of the Heart*. The phrases “the school’s strained budget” and “eliminate funding for the music program” appear in Wikipedia the plot summary of the movie *Mr. Holland’s Opus*.

5. See the first chapter of Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux, *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).
6. Richard C. Merrell, "Gap" [Letter to the Editor], *Music Educators Journal* 57, no. 3(1970): 3.
7. John Kratus, "Music Education at the Tipping Point," *Music Educators Journal* 94, no. 2 (2007): 42–48.
8. Randall Everett Allsup, "Our 'Both/And' Moment," *Music Educators Journal* 102, no. 2 (2015): 85–86.
9. Lauren Kapalka Richerme, "Philosophy in the Music Classroom: Poststructuralist Lessons from *The Lego Movie*," *Music Educators Journal* 102, no. 1 (2015): 62–68.
10. For an explanation of the distinction between a "musical self" and a "performer" and/or "teacher" self, see Elizabeth Bucura, "A Social Phenomenological Investigation of Music Teachers' Sense of Self, Place, and Practice" (PhD diss, Arizona State University, Tempe, 2013).

Writing/Submitting an Article for *Music Educators Journal*

Would you like to share your expertise with other music educators in the form of a scholarly article? *Music Educators Journal (MEJ)* is available to all members of the National Association for Music Education. Your ideas, disseminated via the online *MEJ*, can help thousands of other teachers in their efforts to make music part of a well-rounded education.

Before creating an article for consideration for *Music Educators Journal*, please first read the "Guidelines for Contributors" at bit.ly/MEJguidelines.

These guidelines tell you how to proceed when writing on the topic you choose. You'll also learn about some critical elements to include, such as references to current research, consideration of the National Association for Music Education's [NAfME Strategic Plan](#), and the importance of submitting material that is both original and useful to the classroom music teacher. Since *MEJ* primarily reaches the music educator audience via a digital format, please think about ways to enhance your article with [audio and video components](#) that readers can access directly.

We are specifically seeking manuscripts related to the following topics:

- Advocacy—Proactive Steps toward Avoiding Crises
- Assessment/Evaluation—Toward Efficiency and Accuracy in Our Busy Lives
- Classroom Management—Toward Promoting Student Engagement and Achievement
- Curriculum—Retaining Relevancy While Maintaining Standards
- Elementary General Music—Instruction & Planning
- Orchestra, Strings & Guitar—Instruction & Planning
- Philosophy—How it Can Help Elementary General Music Teachers
- Secondary General Music—How to Increase Enrollment
- Students with Special Needs—Instructional Strategies (borrowed from your school's resource teachers)
- Time-Saving Tips for the Music Teacher—Communicating with Parents, Taking Attendance, Assessment/Evaluation, and so on.
- Working with the Child Voice—Advances in Research, Implications for Instruction

Other options for getting your work in *MEJ* via a book, video, or technology review can be found at bit.ly/NAfMEperiodicals.

Questions? Contact *MEJ* Academic Editor Patrick K. Freer at pfreer@gsu.edu. After July 1, you can get in touch with incoming Academic Editor Katherine Dagmar Strand at kstrand@indiana.edu.



STUDYDADDY

Get Homework Help From Expert Tutor

[Get Help](#)