

**Constant and Change: The Political and Social in the Shaping of
Curriculum; A Response to “The History and Development of
Elementary Music Education in Canada: Curricular Perspective”
(Rodger Beatty)**

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In the concluding section of his essay on the history of elementary music education in Canada, Rodger Beatty notes that “curriculum . . . is always in a state of flux and change.” Curriculum documents and other artifacts of pedagogical decision making provide fascinating records of the tensions between constant and change as well as evidence of the social and political forces that shape education. As much as we might associate curriculum with education reform, curriculum is usually reactionary rather than revolutionary. Curriculum documents are manifestations of the places—the times and spaces—of their origins, and because “place” is a deeply social phenomenon, curriculum documents reflect the views and voices, the politics and power struggles, and the particular experiences of their writers and the ways in which they construct and understand their particular places, including the place of school.

Singing provides a lens through which to consider how place functions in music and music curriculum. Both instruction through music and music instruction have deep roots in singing traditions. The songs of the people—forged in their communities—tell

their stories, reflect their belief systems, preserve their histories, and have been used for

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generations, expressly or implicitly, to teach the younger or newer members of the society or cultural group the ways of the people long before what we now call “music education” existed. Song and singing are available to everyone in the community; nothing but the voice is required to participate. We should not find it surprising, then, that singing appears as both constant and change in elementary music education curricula and that singing reflects shifting views of the place of school.

Beatty’s summary indicates that, in Canada, singing has been and remains at the core of curriculum at the elementary level. A closer and more contextual look at singing within Canadian elementary music curricula, made possible by Beatty’s review, provides evidence of forces that shaped the nation as well as its educational practices. The singing of the sectarian gatherings of peoples who came to North America from elsewhere became part of the education of children who attended the first schools they built and part of the early curricula they developed. As political and social change occurred, so too did curriculum and curriculum documents. The elementary music curriculum shifted to non-sectarian song and changed to include the voices of Canadian peoples who had been excluded, silenced, or ignored. Contemporary provincial curricula reflect not only the structure of the enterprise of education in Canada, but also regional differences and attention to more local places of education.

Beatty’s review also provides evidence that Canadian elementary curricula gradually shifted from singing only or singing almost entirely to include more kinds of musical activity—playing instruments, moving to music, listening, reading music, and creating music. Even the titles of curriculum documents hint at change. “Vocal music” of the early to mid-nineteenth century was replaced by phrases such as “Arts Education”

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and “Elementary Music” by the end of the twentieth century. These shifts reflect, perhaps, both economic and technological change as well as the populist social and political ideals that are part of Canadian history and culture. The changes also suggest a shift in perceptions of music in the context of the broader curriculum and the arts.

Why and how those shifts occurred and the complexities of connections between the social and political underpinnings of education and the philosophies and pedagogies represented in curriculum and enacted in schools deserve a more penetrating analysis and discussion than a short essay allows. Yet amid the tensions of constant and change in the curriculum documents Beatty discusses in his essay lies a premise that seems tied to core social and community ideals and to the value of musical engagement as a means of connecting with community. For example, playing music, which appeared after singing in the curriculum, still represents a gathering to make music with others. Although listening, which gained entree to the curriculum when the early recording technologies became economically viable, appears to be a move away from making music, listening does not necessarily represent a shift away from the social; listeners gather to hear music. Even more recent technologies (note the recent shift to technological competencies in the curricula Beatty reviews), which were thought to isolate listeners in their own headphones and earbuds, have transformed the social dimension of music via line and “podcast” communities. In that technology can alter the perception of space, the places of music communities may be increasingly difficult to locate geographically. Even so, Canadian curriculum documents indicate that group music making remains the central endeavor of music instruction at the elementary level.

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Broad social aims of education—citizenship, communication, personal development, context examined as a matter of “self and community”—are also evident in the elementary music curricula Beatty reviews. Whether one views these as a turn or return to historical goals of education or as a new blurring of the lines of separation between schools and communities, they provide clear markers of the curriculum shaped by social processes and concerns.

While a strong sense of the social in the elementary curriculum may resonate with positive notions of music as social process, the problems inherent in reproducing existing social orders, including those that are exclusionary, remain possible. Further, as Beatty cautions, even when the best document is available, the “intended curriculum does not necessarily lead to implemented curriculum.” Still, when viewed as snapshots of particular places, curriculum documents provide ample opportunity to examine the social and political in music and education, and engaging in this kind of inquiry may lead to more thoughtful and locally sensitive music education practices.