Creative Subversion: Challenging Sociocultural Silencing in Schools

Grounded in the goal of troubling the silence that often pervades spaces of inequality in schools, this action research pilot study examined the role soundscapes might play as a catalyst to open spaces for dialogue that recognizes and interrogates the injustices and oppressive structures present in many schools and communities (Gutstein, 2006). Soundscapes have become more common in music classrooms as a way to encourage students to compose without the restraints of standard notation. Originally intended to help “young children to listen to and use the sounds of their own lives and environments as the basis of what were called ‘sound compositions’” (Regelski, 2011, p. 30), soundscapes can also be used to help students to read their world and grapple with what stories were told.

This project explored the representation of students’ lived experience through soundscapes. Student compositional processes emerged from journaling, interviews with community members, and student discussions. This presentation will explore both student dialogue and discussion, as well as educator reaction and responses to the dialogue prompted by the soundscapes. The project indicates that soundscapes compositions afforded particular spaces for students to develop dialogue, allowing for shared experience and giving the opportunity to peer into each other’s world.

This work engages in interdisciplinarity by drawing together fields of music and acoustic ecology with the politically charged nature of school classrooms and systemic sociocultural oppression.

Key Words:

Soundscape, Inequality, Dialogue, Lived Experience, Silencing
Summary

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the following question:

1. In what ways does collecting and composing with environmental sounds promote critical reflection and discussion?

Perspectives and Theoretical Framework

Grounded in the goal of troubling the silence that often pervades spaces of inequality in schools, this action research pilot study examined the role soundscapes might play as a catalyst to open spaces for dialogue that recognizes, discusses, and interrogates the injustices and oppressive structures present in many schools and communities (Gutstein, 2006). This study took place in a Midwest urban high school chosen for the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of both its student body and the community in which it is located. During this project, students created compositional soundscapes that served as the stimulus for dialogue about diversity and injustice that are often silenced in school communities (Lykes, 1997). Both throughout and at the conclusion of the study, the classroom teacher for the class was interviewed about his reactions and thoughts pertaining to the classroom work and resulting Thus, the purpose of this research was to engage students in an examination of their present in order to see the need for creating actionable change in their possible futures.

Soundscapes have become more common in music classrooms as a way to encourage students to compose without the restraints of standard notation. Dating back
to the 1965 Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project, soundscapes were intended to help “young children to listen to and use the sounds of their own lives and environments as the basis of what were called ‘sound compositions’” (Regelski, 2011, p. 30). The use of soundscapes allowed students to read their world, and grapple with what stories were told, and even more powerfully, for what purpose and to what end.

Method

Students began the project by journaling responses to prompted questions about their home environment. They then collected environmental sounds and worked with an audio mixing program to create a soundscape using their recordings and completed an interview with a local community member from their individual neighborhood. Following the composition process, students engaged in discussions prompted by the soundscapes. The classroom teacher was interviewed throughout the stages of the project and again upon conclusion of the project.

Data Sources

Field notes and recordings from both the teacher interviews and class discussions as well as soundscape recordings were used as data sources.

Results/Conclusions/Interpretations

Preliminary findings suggest that while students were aware of inequalities present in both the school and community, the use of environmental soundscapes opened space for students to dialogue about these inequalities. In addition, students
engaged in discussion about the way silencing within the school environment perpetuates a culture in which inequalities are ignored. Additional themes surrounding the buying and selling of neighborhood culture, the role of educators and administrators, and the direct impact of silencing on the educational environment were also explored. In this session, I will explore the preliminary findings as well as possible extensions to this pilot study.

**Educational Importance of the Study**

Questions of race and socio-economic status are often silenced in schools and treated as taboo discussion. Originally applied to colonialist environments where those being oppressed were ruled by a fear of speaking out, as well as the normalizing of a situation that, under any lens, would be viewed as problematic, the notion of “normal abnormality,” where one may live between accepted normalcy and shocked disorientation (Taussig, 1986-1987, p. 8) can also be found in today’s schools. The students in our school communities come from varying environments, producing a diversity that can result in an educative atmosphere where differences of feelings of “other” are not only ignored, but are silenced. The goal of this research is to the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and an investigation of one’s social and lived reality, as well as the investigation of the social and lived realities of those around us. The use of composition allows students to develop a dialogue, allowing for shared experience and giving the opportunity to peer into each other’s world, eventually breaking the culture of silence surrounding these conversations and creating space for a critically reflective and open classroom.
References


