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## Honor Their World: Advocacy in the Work of Frank Abrahams

### ABSTRACT

*Frank Abrahams's career in music education has been marked by a theme of advocacy for others. This article examines three areas of advocacy apparent in his work and publications: advocacy for students; advocacy for teachers; and advocacy for people historically marginalized in American society. Through books, articles, research, book chapters, music series, and his actions, Frank Abrahams has advocated for stakeholders in education and in society through music education for decades in his roles as a teacher, administrator, and author.*

### Keywords

critical pedagogy, advocacy, music education, learning styles, identity

### INTRODUCTION

In a society shaped by struggles of power, identity, and culture, the role of music educators is one with a unique capacity to shape what the U.S. looks like in the future. With music being such an integral part of cultures around the world, music educators have the power to honor the identities of the students in their classrooms, share new ideas to expand students' understandings of the world, and empower critical thinking skills to imagine what we might become together if we challenge the oppressive structures of the past. The experiences music educators design for students, the repertoire they choose, and the human connections they build through art can reflect our values as a society while modeling change or reinforcing tradition.

As a freshman music education student at Westminster Choir College, I had hoped to help students experience the same types of life-changing engagements with music that had helped me find my sense of self and develop lasting relationships in high school. When choosing my major and deciding on a school, I was not necessarily considering the societal, political, or existential potential of a career in music education. I distinctly remember seeing "Critical Pedagogy I" on my schedule and wondering what that course would entail; I did not know what critical pedagogy meant and assumed it

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was some sort of standard methods course like those I had seen in so many other institutions' course catalogs. As I began my journey through the curriculum that Frank Abrahams had been instrumental in designing and implementing as the Chair of Music Education, I began to realize that I was in a unique program that would push my understanding of teachers, students, and the power of music to levels deeper than I could have understood at the time.

Critical Pedagogy, an approach pioneered by Freire (1968/1970), focuses on challenging the traditional power dynamic between teacher and student to empower students in guiding their learning, taking ownership of their growth, and moving both the student and teacher to new perspectives. Abrahams's (2005, 2007) application of these ideas to music education has had a profound impact on music education. The series of courses I had the privilege of working through during my education were focused on three driving questions: Critical Pedagogy I focused on the question "Who Am I?" and pushed preservice teachers, mostly 18- or 19-year-olds, to consider their positionality within the world. We were challenged to consider our identities, preferences, cultures, prejudices, and goals in ways many of us had never been challenged before. Critical Pedagogy II shifted the focus to "Who are my students?" as we explored various learning styles we might encounter among our students through frameworks like McCarthy's (1987) 4MAT system or Vygotsky's (1978) approaches to cognitive development. As we worked into Critical Pedagogy III, the transformative power of music education took precedence as we examined the question, "Who might we become together?" in the process of education. We grappled with the importance of student voice in education through democratic approaches to education (Dewey, 1916; Simpson et al., 2004) and the importance of students and teachers developing a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) to guide us toward making positive change in the world. The ideas of power, social capital, prejudice, hegemony, and social responsibility were at the forefront of our understanding of what it means to be an educator.

As I worked with Frank Abrahams and got to know him as one of the most important professional and personal mentors in my life, I realized that he had used the power granted to him as a department chair to design a program of study that would encourage all the preservice teachers who went through the curriculum to share, redistribute, and give away the power they would hold as teachers to their students. He designed countless activities that modeled this transition of power, and those moments have influenced the approach of thousands of educators shaping music education in schools and universities today. In addition to the curricular and practical influences he has had on the profession throughout his time in secondary and higher education, Frank's scholarly work throughout his career has conveyed this redistribution of power in giving voice to those who have been historically overlooked, silenced, or oppressed. His work embodied the "...advocacy and activism on behalf of those who are the most vulnerable in classrooms and society" that is a hallmark of a critical pedagogue (Wink, 2011, p. 165). His advocacy on behalf of students, teachers, and people historically

marginalized in American society is apparent in his scholarly work including books, articles, research studies, chapters, and music series.

## ADVOCACY FOR STUDENTS

Abrahams's approach to education has centered on acknowledging and honoring the experiences and expertise of students in education settings. Traditional models of schooling place the power with the teacher and place students in a subordinate role. The title of this article is a phrase used throughout nearly every class Frank has taught to preservice music teachers: "Honor their world." This motto serves to not only acknowledge the lived experiences and expertise of students, but to shift the traditional power dynamic to give students a say in shaping their learning, to use their experiences to meet them where they are, and to build understanding collaboratively. An early example of Abrahams's (1992) advocacy on behalf of students appeared in *General Music Today*, where he shared information grounded in the work of McCarthy (1987) as a means for teachers to better understand the ways in which their students might interact with and process content in school. The explanation of various learning styles as applied to music education served to push teachers to vary their approach in music class so activities targeted and met the needs of a variety of students, rather than only serving those students who were more apt to thrive in a traditional, "banking" (see Freire, 1970) model of education. Decades later, Abrahams (2015) spoke to the unique needs of millennial music students; to effectively engage this generation of learners, he explored the need for relevant, engaging, and technologically integrated approaches that would reflect the contemporary world driven by technology. In a similar vein, Abrahams (2012) advocated for teachers to honor the experiences and motivations of adolescent boys in their decisions around participation in choral music in schools. Grounded in social identity theory and Critical Pedagogy for Music Education, Abrahams (2012) urged teachers to consider the lived experiences and societal pressures that young men face that may prevent them from participating in choral music. He suggested that understanding and valuing these experiences could foster meaningful interpersonal connections, continued participation in choral music programs, and a shift in negative societal perceptions of boys and singing.

As someone who spent the latter portion of his career in higher education preparing future music educators, much of Frank's scholarly work advocates for students in education programs, or preservice music teachers. He conducted research to analyze undergraduate students' practicum experiences to highlight the need for more connection between curricular methods courses and practical training opportunities (Abrahams, 2009). Abrahams (2011) suggested laboratory schools created through school-university partnerships as a powerful means of bolstering preservice music educators' training experiences. Modeled on the work of Dewey's Laboratory School founded in 1896 through the University of Chicago (Durst, 2010, Chapter 1), Abrahams (2007) drew from his experience developing the Westminster Academy, a

laboratory school focused on the implementation of Critical Pedagogy for Music Education and created through a partnership between a public middle school and Westminster Choir College.

Frank's advocacy for music students may best be exemplified in his popular article about Critical Pedagogy for Music Education published in the *Music Educators Journal* in 2005, in which he wrote, "Understanding that children come to the classroom with some prior musical knowledge gleaned from life experiences is an important part of the critical teaching approach. This understanding leads to changes in perception for both the students and the teacher" (p. 62). This article presents a practical example of students synthesizing the popular contemporary music of Madonna with a more traditional focus on Mozart's "Queen of the Night" aria. Abrahams guided the reader through not only the philosophy behind Critical Pedagogy for Music Education, but also provided a practical, actionable application of the philosophy to a hands-on activity that would work in a school setting. Abrahams (2005) explained how valuing and incorporating student perspectives can create lasting engagements with music, writing, "When teachers relate school music to the music in students' personal lives, the students feel empowered by their knowledge and are alerted to the plentiful opportunities for meaningful musical experiences inside and outside the classroom" (p. 62). This article not only demonstrated advocacy on behalf of music students, but also served to provide a practical resource for music teachers to use in their everyday professional lives, exemplifying his advocacy for and support of teachers throughout his career.

## **ADVOCACY FOR TEACHERS**

Despite the profession's reputation as one of the most noble jobs in society, teachers are often tasked with daunting expectations and limited support, rendering them less powerful than those passing laws, setting institutional expectations, or determining the distribution of resources. Frank's advocacy for teachers throughout his career, particularly his modus operandi to provide practical resources to benefit teachers in their day-to-day work, has had a powerful impact on in-service teachers across the globe. To date, one of his most popular books is one of several collaborations with Paul Head, *Case Studies in Music Education* (Abrahams & Head, 2005), which provides teachers with practical cases drawn from real experiences that challenge the reader's assumptions and push for thoughtful resolution of common challenges music teachers may face. Despite the dramatic shifts in aspects of American society over the decades since its publication, the ideas behind the cases in this book are still relevant and provide guidance to teachers in a variety of circumstances. Another practical resource for in-service teachers from Abrahams and Head (2011) is *Teaching Music Through Performance in Middle School Choir*, which provides a plethora of developmentally-appropriate choral pieces paired with thoughtful curricular tie-ins and lessons for teachers to draw from in their own teaching. For educators at the collegiate level, Abrahams and Head's (2017) *The Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy* represents several philosophical approaches and

lenses and serves to deepen the understanding of choral conducting, pedagogy, and philosophy.

In my own collaborations with Frank, our aim has been to examine the experiences of in-service teachers and to provide practical resources to streamline and simplify their daily responsibilities. One of our first collaborations beginning in 2013 focused on studying the trending expectation for teachers to design and assess student growth objectives as part of their own professional appraisal (Abrahams & John, 2016). We found that teachers often designed objectives they were confident students could meet while not necessarily challenging students as they otherwise might out of concern that the students' success in these objectives was directly tied to the teachers' performance evaluation and job security. This practice seemed to restrict teachers' ability to design authentic, challenging, and relevant musical experiences out of concern they would not be able to meet the logistical requirements and growth metrics to retain their positions. These findings informed *Planning Instruction in Music* (Abrahams & John, 2015), in which we sought to provide teachers with a streamlined lesson plan template and sample lessons that would allow teachers to consistently meet district, state, and federal expectations while keeping students' engagement, growth, and transformation at the forefront of experiences with music in school. *Becoming Musical* (Abrahams & John, 2017) furthered this goal by providing teachers with practical and philosophical applications of the ideas behind our lesson planning model to a variety of methods, disciplines, and contexts common among music teachers. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we revised our lesson plan template with additional practical resources in a free online supplement for teachers striving to meet the inordinate challenges of teaching music to students in live, online, and hybrid settings (Abrahams & John, 2020). With the important social upheavals and calls for justice in American society that coincided with the pandemic, Frank's work to give voice to those of marginalized groups also comes to mind.

## **ADVOCACY FOR PEOPLE IN HISTORICALLY MARGINALIZED GROUPS**

As an educator and administrator, Frank has advocated for the inclusion and centering of people with membership in groups that have been historically marginalized in American society. Drawing on the ideas of power, privilege, and capital prevalent in the approaches of Freire (1970), Giroux (1983), and hooks (1994) that guided much of his career, Abrahams collaborated with two preservice music educators to examine their experiences working with people in prison who participated in a prison choir run by the two preservice teachers (Abrahams et al., 2012). Not only does this article highlight the choir members' experience and the social justice elements of the repertoire with which the choir members and their directors engaged, it models a scholarly



collaboration that shared the experiences of those with less societal capital, namely the preservice teachers and the inmates, with the world in a major academic publication.

Drawing on his own identity and heritage, Frank's work as editor of the *Westminster Conservatory Youth Chorale Jewish Music Series* from Transcontinental Music Publications provided numerous arrangements of music and new settings of text from Jewish culture. With a relative dearth of representation of Jewish culture available from major publishers for youth choirs, especially in the early 2000s when the series was published, this series expanded the repertoire available for educators and choir directors to program. Repertoire from the series has appeared on programs for numerous school, youth, and community groups. The pieces included in this series represent religious and secular texts in Hebrew and English that provide opportunities for Jewish musicians to honor and celebrate their culture and non-Jewish musicians the opportunity to engage with music representing the foundations of experiences other than their own.

Outside of his published work, Frank has been an advocate and ally for those who have been marginalized or oppressed in society in his work as an educator and administrator. Feeling that the placement of a piece with an explicitly Christian message within the commencement ceremony was unacceptable for non-Christian students, Frank did not attend commencement at his university in opposition to the message this hegemonic tradition sent to students of other faiths or atheist students. Working with many students within the LGBTQ+ community throughout his career, Frank has served as an ally and supportive presence for many students, myself included, who struggled with reconciling their identity with their family, faith, or community. In my time as his student, colleague, and friend, there have been numerous times where Frank has modeled reflection and sought to repair harm when he has realized or been informed that something he has done has hurt someone or further marginalized someone. He has often demonstrated his willingness to hear feedback or criticism and approach those moments as opportunities to grow, to learn, and to shift his perspective.

## CONCLUSION

Looking through decades of Frank Abrahams's contributions to the profession of music education, the theme of advocacy for others is clear throughout his work focused on honoring students' lived experiences, supporting teachers in practical ways, and bringing voice to those who society has tried to silence. He has shared his work in many forms and presented his findings throughout the world while continually seeking to foster meaningful musical experiences for students and to challenge traditional power structures within education. He has motivated countless educators to think critically about their role in shaping our society, and in turn, those educators have gone out to challenge traditional power dynamics within their classrooms and communities by empowering their students to be agents of change. The work of Frank's career, building on the philosophies of transformation and hope shared by those who came before him, has centered the capacity for positive change that music educators have in our world.

In seeking to honor his students' world, he has empowered them to make sure there is a place in the world for everyone.

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### About the Author

Ryan John teaches at Léman Manhattan Preparatory School in New York City where his courses include the 6th-12th grade choirs, digital music, and instrumental group lessons. He is the music director for the Léman Main Stage musicals and coordinates the Léman Conservatory private lesson program. Ryan holds degrees from Westminster Choir College of Rider University, and he has presented at conferences in the United States and abroad. He is the author of *Canvas LMS Course Design* and is a co-author with Frank Abrahams of *Planning Instruction in Music* and *Becoming Musical*.