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## **Narrative Inquiry in Music Education: Troubling Certainty: A Review Essay**

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### **Introduction**

The research in this volume is drawn from the first Narrative in Music Education (NIME) conference that took place in 2005. This visionary conference offered a generous space for dialogue about music education practice and research as narrative inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Leading qualitative research scholars provided keynote presentations, including Wayne Bowman and Jean Clandinin who also contributed concluding chapters in this text. Margaret Barrett and Sandra Stauffer, organizers of the NIME conference, edit this book.

This volume aims to provide multiple perspectives on the varied ways that education in music is experienced for both learner and teacher. In addition to the multiplicity of learning environments and approaches to musical instruction described in these chapters, the editors offer a wide range of opportunities for the voices of members of the greater musical education community to enter

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<sup>1</sup> The dialogue continues at subsequent conferences, one held in 2007 and the NIME3 conference in 2010. See: <http://nime3.com/>

into the conversation. Yet, Barrett and Stauffer assert that this text goes beyond providing a forum for engaging in the conversations that narrative research in music education may initiate and foster. While important to provide a public space for dialogue, another goal emerges: that of “troubling certainty.”

In questioning a grand narrative, Kohn (1993) asserts,

There is a time to admire the grace and persuasive power of an influential idea, and there is a time to fear its hold over us. The time to worry is when the idea is so widely shared that we no longer even notice it, when it is so deeply rooted that it feels to us like plain common sense. At the point when objections are not answered anymore because they are no longer even raised, we are not in control: we do not have an idea; it has us. (p. 2)

It is this sort of certainty that Barrett and Stauffer seek to trouble. Narrative inquiry allows both researcher and reader to reconsider grand narratives—experiences beyond our own through stories analyzed and carefully constructed; to look into the familiar and strange (van Manen, 1990), to reconsider what music education was and is and may become.

We hope to make a space in the discourse of inquiry in music education, one in which “troubling” may give pause for thought and prompt the community to consider the many ways in which we know and come to know. (Editors, p. 2)

Citing Greene’s (1995) notion of “wide awakeness,” the editors suggest that the storied experiences of musicians and music educators may allow researchers and the education community to “see” and “hear” in new ways. Greene’s (2001) description of arts in education resonates with these ideas about arts education research.

Perceiving, imagining, searching for meaning....We realize now that the worlds presented to us, made available to us by works of art, are not the worlds of ordinary reality, of the commonplace. What we have discovered...is qualitatively other than the everyday. Being other, offering us new vantage points, it has made us hear as never before; it has enabled us to see. (p. 35)

Barone (2007) urges readers to question the place of certainty in educational research. While recognizing the human predisposition for closure (“certainty”) that is provided in other research methods, Barone suggests the importance of a

second research purpose....texts that offer varied (sometimes even conflicting) renditions of educational phenomena (Barone, 2002). These are narrative constructions with the power to lift the veil of conventionality from my eyes as they subtly raise disturbing questions about the necessity and desirability of comfortable, familiar educational discourses and practices. (p. 465)

This path of discourse through narrative inquiry in music education is the path deliberately chosen and carefully traveled by Barrett and Stauffer. Not knowing how these chapters might be received or transform reader to action in a myriad of unknown settings, Barrett and Stauffer have articulated their goals through their own commentary and through the voices of the authors presented in this book. In choosing studies for this volume, the editors sought to bring forward studies in which researchers question certainty and thus trouble the ways ideas or ways of being in educational settings have been accepted as norms. As exemplified in this work, narrative inquiry allows time for researcher, participant, and reader to dwell together, consider lived experience, and then reconsider the ways human relationships, daily routines, tacit or explicit expectations, as well as methods of learning and teaching may inform us as teachers, researchers, learners, and as fellow human beings.

### **Entering into the Dialogue**

The metaphor of dialogue continues with a multiplicity of voices represented in the research chapters that comprise the body of this book. Seven early career narrative inquirers share stories of experience from a wide range of contexts. Each example is “accompanied by a reflective commentary written by an experienced music education scholar” (p. 3). Readers should note that the providing of this commentary does not suggest that it is *the way* to read the text. Rather it is *a way*, another lens from which to view the text and as such, offers another voice in the dialogue that ensues. For the novice researcher, it enables a window into the thinking of a “more experienced other” (Vygotsky, 1978) who, through the shared commentary, provides virtual mentoring as well as an alternative perspective.

Because of the extensive commentary that bookends the chapters representing the research studies, this text is a valuable edition for researchers who are interested in engaging in narrative inquiry<sup>2</sup> in their own work. Barrett and Stauffer provide extensive information on the book in the Introduction, Prelude, and Postlude. In addition, the editors offer two chapters preceding the studies in which they explore the development of narrative inquiry and its place and role in

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see also: Barone (2001), Chase, (2005), Clandinin (2007), Clandinin & Connelly (2000), Reissman (2008).

music education research. Barrett and Stauffer explore the development of narrative from story to method, from a “mode to know” to a “mode of inquiry,” including the relational nature of narrative inquiry. They suggest,

Perhaps what distinguishes narrative inquiry is the way in which “story” can operate as a “relational” mode of constructing and presenting meaning (p. 10)...It is deeply relational—even co-relational—work. It is inquiry that makes evident to readers the lived experiences of individuals and groups by foregrounding *their* narratives and *their* understandings. (p. 20)

This connects closely to Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) idea about the relational nature of narrative inquiry as more than method or representation; it is a way of life.

Barrett and Stauffer connect narrative to the arts in that “narrative seeks communication beyond the immediate or surface meanings, and reverberation past the present moment. Narrative is resonant work” (p. 20). They assert that resonant work has four qualities—it is

respectful, responsible, rigorous, and resilient....These four qualities are both symbiotic and obligate in narrative, meaning not only that they are present in the living work of narrative, but also that these qualities, as interdependent rather than autonomous acts and attributes, comprise an ethical grounding and imperative for narrative work. (p. 20)

The remainder of chapter two is used to fully articulate these qualities of resonant work.

### **The Narrative Inquiries**

The seven narrative inquiries presented in the text serve as models of analysis of narrative and narrative construction<sup>3</sup> with commentaries provided by internationally known scholars Graham Welch, Rosalynd Smith, Marie McCarthy, Magne Espeland, Kathryn Marsh, Peter Dunbar-Hall, and Janet Barrett.

In “Storying the Lifeworld: Illumination Through Narrative Case Study,” David Cleaver offers a narrative case study portrait of Jan, a student whose musical identity seems to be developed outside the school experience. In his concluding statement, Cleaver speaks to the transformative

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<sup>3</sup> See Barone (2008) and Polkinghorne (1995).

nature of the research experience with emphasis on the relational impact of the participants.

By participating, they invited me to understand something of the way that intense, intimate, and complex individual musical identities may form and evolve...Through listening to and engaging with their stories, my own ideological positioning has been challenged. A shift takes place in the perception of my function and role as a music educator. (p. 55)

In his commentary on this study, Graham Welch offers:

Cleaver's narrative illustrates how this [providing a wide range of perspectives] might be done by mining the evidence base from different inter- and intrapersonal viewpoints whilst seeking to create a holistic and engaging "story" that extends our understanding of the phenomenon and the case in question. (p. 61)

Next, in "The Importance of Being Henry," Tom Langston uses analysis of narrative from data collected through interview and observation to construct one choral singer's story of engagement in a choir community with exploration of the nature and development of social capital. As respondent Rosalyn Smith notes, this study does much to offer the reader a view of the choral singer's investment and agency within the community of choral ensembles. Further, paying attention to the nature of communication within an interview, Smith notes,

The text also demonstrates clearly how the ways in which an interview is structured can shape the outcome and the need for transparency in reporting the context of data collection. Rather than giving the false impression that he speaks for the participant, Langston shows that it is possible to make a virtue of closeness to the subject by constructing a story that includes both interviewer and interviewee as characters. (p. 85)

In "Filtered Through the Lenses of Self: Experiences of Two Preservice Music Teachers," Kaye Ferguson offers the reader an insider view of emerging teacher identity for novice music teachers and the ways that their identity was shaped by tacit and realized perceptions of self. Marie McCarthy's commentary provides the reader with a valuable theoretical frame for rethinking narrative discourse via Ferguson's study by drawing upon Chase's (2005) criteria of narrative and temporality, narrative as verbal action, narrative and sociality, narrative as socially situated interactive performances, and the narrative researcher as narrator.

"Learning from the Learners: A Cooperating Teacher's Story," by Jeffrey Davis, tells the story of Nora, a veteran elementary music teacher, though her teacher education was in science. The

interviews with Nora focused upon her experiences with four student teachers and the contributions those students made to her understanding of teaching. An emergent theme demonstrated that relationships, not just a transfer of knowledge and expertise, are essential to the success of a student teaching experience. In his commentary, Magne Espeland nods to the convincing story of Nora that Davis offers with its view of teachers as real people and the relational nature of teaching and learning that informs excellence in teaching. As for the bigger picture of research informing policy, Espeland writes,

*And I think it also ended up in a reassured conviction—at least for me—that narrative research has important stories to tell. The basic challenge, however, remains the same: How are we going to make the decision-makers listen and understand? Maybe by using mirrors, lots of mirrors, in different settings and different contexts which can reflect the qualities of teachers as *real people*, such as Nora, and not general teacher abilities directed and framed by the rhetoric of teacher efficiency. (p. 134)*

Catherine Kroon's "Everybody Should Be Heard; Everybody Has Got a Story to Tell, or a Song to Sing" explores an environment for learners with special needs in which music learning played a therapeutic role. She explored the students' lived experience to consider the ways music affected their emotional, intellectual, and physical states. In her commentary, Kathryn Marsh speaks to the ways this study gives voice to the voiceless, providing avenues of empowerment through music. Marsh prods us further by reminding us that we, as teachers, can sometimes lose sight of the child—any child—in our focus on the development of musical knowledge and skills. "In Kroon's vivid account, children and their individual needs emerge as central to music in education" (p. 156).

Andrew Goodrich employed ethnographic techniques to explore the musical life world of a high-school jazz band director and his role in the success of his jazz program. In his chapter titled, "G," Goodrich credited the director's ability to create an environment saturated with jazz to personal qualities such as enthusiasm, connections to others in the jazz community, recognition of his own limitations and willingness to learn, and commitment to developing both musicianship and leadership among his students. In the accompanying commentary, Peter Dunbar-Hall notes the use of Goodrich's ethnographic narrative and the inclusion of conflicting positions, to provide a reflection on pedagogy: "a series of cognitive and practical exemplars of what for some trainee music educators remain elusive practices" (p. 177).

In "Stories From the Front," Loretta Niebur Walker presents an artfully crafted narrative construction drawn from her experiences as a music teacher in a military base elementary school. Her narrative brings into focus the multiple voices and visions of what music is and its unique—

and possibly differing—role in the lives of students and their educators. As commentator Janet Barrett notes, Walker’s portrayal of her classroom presses us to grapple with significant questions and to search for resemblances in our own musical experiences both as learners and teachers.

Readers are drawn in to consider the significance of curricular decisions, the implications that attend seemingly mundane choices of musical examples, and the serendipitous spaces for expression that are created when teachers are sensitive to children’s emotional needs and are willing to accommodate them. (p. 197)

### **Seeing Anew Through Narrative**

Leading scholars in education research, Jean Clandinin and Wayne Bowman, offer extensive chapters at the conclusion of the book, discussing both narrative inquiry and the exemplars in the body of the text. Bowman, too, explores the collaborative nature of narrative inquiry, “The relationship...is deeply collaborative, consultative, cooperative, reflexive, and governed by profoundly ethical obligations....To this extent, the meaning and significance of narrative work is co-constructed” (p. 213). I would extend that collaboration to the reader, who enters the text as a co-conspirator (Barone, 2000) in meaning-making. A hallmark of qualitative research is its emphasis on transferability (reader resonance) rather than generalizability (external certainty). Bowman asserts that “the narrative inquirer is deeply wary of efforts to speak for everyone and everywhere and is keenly sensitive to the fallibility of generalization” (p. 213). Clandinin affirms that each story invites the reader into the setting and offers openings for the reader to enter the story from her own vantage point and life experiences. These rich interchanges between reader and storied participant serve as the transformational nudge to reconsider life and learning for young musicians.

I, too, enter into these stories as a reader connecting to my own life experiences. Here I connect to my experiences as a music teacher and teacher-researcher (Blair, 2008), exploring the musical lives of young students as they listen to music while collaboratively creating musical maps of their musical understanding during the shared musical experience. When later sharing the musical maps with their peers—by simultaneously tracing the map while all listened again to the music, students frequently exclaimed, “I never heard that until I saw it on their map!” Even though the students had heard the music dozens of times and had listened to it ever so carefully to be able to create their own map, the nuanced visual and kinesthetic representation of another would bring to light something unique or tacitly known yet now newly articulated and brought into fresh attention. This is the gift of narrative inquiry—to help us to see, hear, and feel nuances of lived experience in classrooms: to creatively and artfully share stories of musical lives immersed in teaching and learning, to notice the common and the unique, to question and reconsider the familiar and the strange, to connect with others in ways that may transform the lives of

those engaged in educational community.

Finally, at the conclusion of this book, Jean Clandinin and Wayne Bowman offer final thoughts on the research studies presented in this text, their accompanying commentaries, and the role of narrative inquiry in both education and music education research. Clandinin suggests that this book will serve as a luminary for narrative in music education research. As narrative researchers seek to explore situated living in a temporal landscape, the notion of its participants as “becoming” (as opposed to static “research participants”) is an important characteristic of the human experience. Here, too, this text represents narrative inquiry in music education as “becoming”—not static or non-evolving. The chapters and perspectives represented here demonstrate the dynamic dialogue and the vitality of both musical experience and music education research that the venue of narrative inquiry offers. This book serves as a call for others to join in the journey of this conversation.

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Deborah V. Blair is Assistant Professor and Coordinator of Music Education at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. She holds a PhD in Music Education from Oakland University, where she earned the 2006 Dissertation Award. Blair's research interests include the application of constructivist learning theory and its implications for music learning and teaching in different contexts, including preservice and inservice music teacher education, general and choral music settings, and music for special needs learners.

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