



## **CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN THE COMMUNITY MUSIC EDUCATION PROGRAMS OF BRAZIL**

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Paulo Freire (1970) developed critical pedagogy to teach oppressed Brazilian adults to read. Freire documented his ideas in a landmark publication entitled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This article discusses and reports my findings on Freirian methods evident in music education programs in Rio de Janeiro, Alvorada, Recife, and São Caetano.

To further my studies of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, and to explore the implications and applications of his teachings, I spent three months in Brazil to observe Freirian methods evident in the music education programs there. My objective was to meet music teachers and other educators who were applying Freirian principles in their classrooms, and to see if what I observed might be applicable to music education in the United States – particularly to music education in urban settings.

This study reports on outreach programs in music education at four locations throughout Brazil: Rio de Janeiro, Alvorada, Recife, and São Caetano. These programs, called *projetos*, existed as enrichment programs and are supplementary

to the limited and often nonexistent offerings at the public and private school. While the projetos may have been housed inside school facilities, they were separate from the academic programs students take.

To record data, I made daily entries into a personal journal and videotaped each site observation. I recorded, again on videotape, interviews with the teachers I met and observed. These conversations were often informal and sometimes in the car, at a restaurant, or during the intermission of a concert. While I was able to triangulate some data, the conclusions I draw at the end of this study are based on my subjective interpretation of the data.

The data collection for this study was completed during September, October, and November of 2004. Analysis of the data and completion of the final document occurred during January, February, and March of 2005.

### **Paulo Freire, Critical Pedagogy, and Music Education**

Paulo Freire (1970, 1973, 1985, 1998) believed in the power of individuals to come to a critical consciousness of their own existence, through a process he labeled conscientization. Reacting against what he called the “banking concept,” where teachers “deposited” knowledge into the learning “accounts” of their students. Paulo Freire developed critical pedagogy to teach oppressed Brazilian adults to read. Freire documented his ideas in a landmark publication entitled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. According to Rose (1990), “Freire maintained that teachers and students are agents actively engaged in the process of constructing and reconstructing meaning. Transformation rests on the individual’s ability to appropriate reality through naming, reading, and thus knowing reality. From this

appropriation, action can be taken and reality can be transformed” (p. 46-47).

Three precepts form a foundation for critical pedagogy. The first is Freire’s idea that learners exist in a cultural context and, as such, must learn to reflect on their situation (Freire, 1970). Secondly, Freire (1970) taught that several conditions must result from instruction before one can claim that learning has occurred. One of these conditions is the connection of “word to world.” Freire argued that unless the learning facilitates a change in the student’s perception of reality, learning has not occurred. Teachers, according to Freire, facilitate that connection by helping students draw on their own realities to create new possibilities. As Weiler (1988) explains, “one of the most important pedagogical tenets for Freire was the need for teachers to respect the consciousness and culture of their students and to create the pedagogical situation in which students can articulate their understanding of the world” (p. 18). At the same time, teachers must be self-reflective and seek to understand their own presuppositions, the ideological prism through which external reality is sorted and understood (Freire, 1973). Thus, according to Rose (1990) “both students and teachers must seek to understand the forces of hegemony within their own consciousness as well as in the structured, historical circumstances in which they find themselves” (p. 47).

As the third precept of critical pedagogy, Freire (1970, 1973) developed the concept of conscientization. He described conscientization as a phenomenon that occurs in students with the realization that they “know that they know.” It is a powerful realization that takes them to a more critical level of consciousness and adds a feeling of dimensionality to the learning

experience. Freire (1970) himself defined conscientization as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 17). Critical pedagogy is concerned not only with the change that occurs in the students as a result of the learning, but also with the change that occurs in the teacher. In critical pedagogy, teachers learn from their students in addition to teaching them. This affects a transformation in both students and their teachers. When this occurs, Freire (1970) claimed that true and meaningful learning has occurred.

### **Research Questions**

Open-ended questions, developed from Freire’s teaching, framed this study. These questions were:

1. To what extent do the experiences children have learning music in Brazil honor the students’ world?
2. To what extent do the experiences children have learning music in Brazil connect word to world?
3. To what extent do the experiences children have learning music in Brazil foster conscientization?
4. To what extent do the experiences children have learning music in Brazil foster transformation of the student and the teacher?

5. To what extent do the experiences children have learning music in Brazil empower student musicianship?

### **The Setting**

Internationally, Brazil is known for its sugarcane, coffee, and beautiful beaches. While the rhythms of *samba*, *forró*, and *vanerão* are inviting, so are the warm and friendly Brasileiros. But, Brazil is also the scene of extreme poverty. Even though the best and brightest choose professional occupations such as medicine, engineering, and law, they struggle to make ends meet. The situation is nearly impossible for teachers and the financial circumstances are worse still for musicians.

In 1996, a law was passed that mandated the inclusion of the arts in public school curriculums, but the notion of teaching music as a separate discipline was and is a relatively new concept in Brazil. Instead of placing music class inside the school day, there are an abundance of music education programs for children within the various communities. Examples of these community programs can be found in Rio de Janeiro at the Brazilian Conservatory and in the Community Center at Rocinha. In Porto Alegre, the symphony orchestra sponsored outreach programs in poorer communities such as Alvorada. Outside Recife, in São Caetano, there is a music school that provided lessons and ensembles for some of the poorest children in Northeast Brazil. In all instances, the programs are funded by private donors – including some from Europe – with supplemental assistance from the municipalities.

Maintaining regular attendance in public school is a condition of participation in most programs. Typically, the programs included musicianship training, called *musicalization*, and instruction on various musical instruments (the most popular being guitar and native Brazilian drums). Some programs included vocal and instrumental ensembles as well. Teachers in these programs are freelance musicians, graduate students, and volunteers who worked on a part-time basis for little or no salary. All expressed a belief that the study of music made for a better person and improved the quality of one's life.

While there are community activities for adults, such as the Symphony Chorus in Porto Alegre, or the many choral groups in Rio de Janeiro or the Nation of Pernambuco (a community group in Recife that recreates the historic Maractu ritual to sold out houses), the focus of this paper is on three community programs for children and my experience as the guest conductor of a community chorus at the university in Recife.

### *Escola Música de Rocinha*

Rocinha, the largest *favela* (slum community) in South America, is home to over 200,000 residents. The homes in the Rocinha community are tumble-down brick houses or shacks that are pressed tightly together along the mountain side. Most illicit drug activity in Rio is connected to the favelas and to Rocinha in particular.

At the foot of the Rocinha favela is a community center built by four private

corporations. The eighteen-story building is modern, new, and houses a variety of community-based activities, including an extensive sports program. There is a cafeteria and daycare facility on the ground floor, and facilities for an extensive music program on the seventeenth floor.

The music program began ten years ago with 14 children and now boasts 150, including 80 children in the kindergarten classes alone. Consistent with Freirian ideals, the goal of the program is to use music to bring a better quality of life to the children and to compliment what they learn in school. Students take weekly lessons, play or sing in ensembles, and perform in concerts throughout the community. This, their teachers say, enhances self-esteem.

On the day I visited, I watched a children's choir consisting of 60 children, ages ten to twelve. They sang repertoire from the Brazilian popular and folk heritages in two and three parts. The rehearsal included exercises to help children place tone into their head voices, but the teacher told me that children often come to rehearsals hoarse, as they are very loud at home. As a result, the students are in poor vocal health. In addition, they imitated the popular singers who sing in low chest registers, posing problems for the chorus, and Valéria, their teacher, tried throughout the rehearsal to compensate for this. Ironically, on the day that I observed, the teacher was also hoarse.

During the rehearsal, I heard several rounds of fire-crackers which my interpreter called "bombs." He explained that the residents set off the bombs to warn others of a possible police raid, or gang raid, or impending shooting.

No one in the room seemed to notice but me, and I was told that this is a very routine occurrence.

*Projeto Ouviravida, Alvorada, RS*

I visited Projeto Ouviravida when I traveled to Alvorada, about forty-five minutes from Porto Alegre in the South of Brazil. The school where the music program happens is in Umbú, which is the poorest and most depressed neighborhood of the city. Residents live in broken down shacks. Horse drawn carriages provide transportation to the central part of the city, which is only slightly better than the Umbú neighborhood.

Created in 1999 as a partnership involving the cities of Alvorada, Gravataí, and the Educational Outreach arm of the Orquestra Sinfônica de Porto Alegre (OSPA), the program services children ages seven- to eight-years-old by providing music lessons on recorder, Brazilian percussion instruments, guitar and voice. In total, two hundred and fifty children participated in three cities. The teaching materials, which are designed by educators working for the Orchestra, provide social, cultural and educational activities for children in depressed communities. According to their website, “The purpose of the program is to stimulate through the dialogue of making music, better citizens.” The lessons provide “a pleasant activity and opens them to a new reality, where the daily violence is substituted by the melody.” Though the literature did not acknowledge it, both goals are consistent with Freirian pedagogy. Everyone in the program sang in chorus, and then chose to add instrumental lessons as they are able. Children spent the first hour of the morning in sectional rehearsals and then the second hour in the large

ensemble. During the week, the children took classes in “musicalization” and received group instruction on guitar, recorder and percussion. Classes are also held in the morning and afternoon during the week, and students attended when they are not in regular school classes. Like most of the projects I observed, attendance in the public schools is a condition of participation. Students, who are recruited from the various schools, must agree to stay enrolled in public schools throughout the duration of their participation in the music project.

I first watched the large ensemble rehearsal and then I met with the staff to discuss the program. They spoke of the social purposes of the program and all agreed that students who participate tend to do better in school and are less likely to become involved with the drug trafficking that plagues the neighborhood. I heard of several instances where students choose to come to extra classes of the program when their regular school is not in session. I read a card that was sent with a gift to the teachers earlier in the week by the mother of two children in the program to thank the teachers for the joy they gave to her children and how much the children benefited from the music program.

### *Fundação Música e Vida de São Caetano*

On a Saturday in November, I traveled two hours from Recife to São Caetano, where I met a musician named Mozart Vieira do Nascimento. Mozart, like Kodály, has devoted his life to teaching a group of young people from the neighborhoods to sing and play authentic folk music from their region. His goal, again like Kodály’s, was to preserve and perpetuate

the culture and the style. Today, the school is a place where children come each day during the hours when they are not in school to learn musical instruments, music theory, how to play in the Banda Sinfônica, and how to sing in the choir. The repertoire is eclectic, but focused on music that is indigenous to the folk traditions and culture of the neighborhood. Dreams for the school included a cafeteria and the addition of academic classes, so that students could spend an entire day, everyday, at the facility and learn music along with their general education.

In a material sense, the program is Spartan, but in an artistic sense, the program is rich in what it is able to do for the children who study there. There are two hundred children in all who studied music at the school. About thirty-five of them played in the band and sang in the choir. Graduates, from the first generation of students, volunteered their time to serve as teachers.

On the morning of my visit, the band played a concert that included German waltzes, popular Brazilian selections with maracatu and bossa nova rhythms and two American pieces – *Down By The Riverside* and *My Way*. After lunch, the students sang some folk music for me, as well as a beautiful setting of *Ave Maria* by Villa Lobos. The music program is quite impressive in that although the tone quality is thin, the music the children played is artistic and performed well. They played and sang in tune and honored the stylistic conventions of the repertoire. Typically, it is difficult to get young American adolescent men to sing, but in Brazil, the children do not care. They view singing as something that is as natural as speaking or walking.

Later in the afternoon, I had the opportunity to meet and speak with the students and their teachers. Many told me stories of how this program made a difference in their lives. For example, a gentleman named Carlos Antonio da Silva was found, as a newborn, in a shoebox on the doorstep of an orphanage. As a young child, he discovered Mozart's program and learned to play the clarinet. Today, he holds degrees in clarinet performance and music education from the Federal University of Pernambuco in Recife, he teaches in a public school, and he serves as a teacher and principal of the Fundação Música e Vida de São Caetano in his free time. So significant is the impact of Mozart's program in bringing music into Carlos' life that he named his son Beethoven and his daughter Clara Schumann. Another story was from a fifteen-year-old saxophone player who told me that he believed that he had a gift for music; his father was encouraging him, hoping that he would be able to play in the army band when he is older. Another student thought that, as a professional musician, he could help his family. A trumpet player, Ivanilson Nascimento, told me that studying music enabled him to think faster and to use his brain more.

Many children in the program felt pressure from their parents to work in order to contribute to the family income. One student told me that his father believed that it is not necessary to study popular music because everyone just knows it. It is not something that required formal study. Other parents believed that playing in the program helped their children build self-esteem and kept them occupied and off of the streets. Some parents believed that being in the program would discourage teen pregnancy and teen prostitution. Both, they told me, are serious problems in the neighborhood.

## Community Choral Programs

In recent years, there has been a shift away from choral art music in Brazil in favor of choirs that sing for pleasure or choirs organized to promote socialization and community. For example, in Rio, the Chief of Police, believing that singing in choirs helped people learn to work together, required all officers on the force to sing in the policeman's chorus. A telemarketing company formed a chorus to teach the employees to better care for their voices to ensure a healthy telemarketer. The television station for this area has a choir because the employees think that it will teach them breath control and will develop their abdominal muscles.

During my visit, there was mention of a conductor who directs the "Alcoholic Choir of Rio." In this ensemble, the members come to sing and to drink scotch. When the conductor first took the job, she made a rule that prevented any drinking until after the rehearsal. The singers rebelled and explained to her that they want to drink *and* sing, and that if she could not comply, they would find another conductor. Needless to say, the choir does not perform often.

I had firsthand experience with a community choral group at the Federal University of Pernambuco with one hundred and twenty singers. Included were undergraduates, graduate students, alumni, and a significant number of community singers who worked at the University and who sang in the choir during their lunch hour (which is two hours every day). The age range appeared to be from approximately eighteen to seventy. I was invited to work with the choir for four weeks and then to conduct them in a public

performance.

In the beginning, I found the choir to be very receptive to my interpretive and technical ideas about the pieces. By the end of the second week, I did not see the drive or the compulsion to excel from most of the choir members. Instead, I saw an acceptance of mediocre as good. Also, regular attendance by all at the choir rehearsals was inconsistent as well. At each rehearsal, I corrected notes repeatedly, but no one *really* listened, and so the notes remained incorrect. Yet, at the end of the rehearsal, I was attacked by folks of all ages, men and women alike, who wanted to touch me, kiss me, or hug me and tell me how much they loved what I was doing for the choir. Clearly, singing in the group was a social experience.

## **Analysis**

Formal music education in Brazil is centered on extension programs, such as the ones I observed. Much like the preparatory programs in community music schools in the United States, students attend private lessons and take classes outside of school. In that way, the privilege of participation is met with the condition that the children stay in school.

Each music program I observed offered instruction in basic musicianship, group or private lessons, and ensembles. The quality varied and depended on the abilities of the teachers as pedagogues and musicians. All of the teachers in these programs earned their living by teaching in as many different projects as they could and playing gigs on the side to supplement their meager teaching salaries. Nevertheless, all took pride in what they did and

believed that the experiences they offered the students would contribute to a better quality of life.

Orchestras consisted of many recorders, guitars, and native Brazilian drums, with a few other instruments added as were available. In one ensemble there were cellos and violins, and in another there was one trumpet. In nearly every ensemble, I heard music of the Beatles. Considered classics in the United States, the repertory of Lennon & McCartney is standard fare in Brazil and is complimented by popular or folk music from the local culture.

While I sometimes thought that children in Brazil seemed to be born with a high quality of musicianship, I did observe formal instruction in musicianship, called “musicalization,” in all of the programs and projetos I visited. Skill building and the nurturing of musicianship are built into the choral rehearsals.

Teachers are paid very little in Brazil. As a result, some came to realize that what they do is not valued. From my experiences at the university at Pernambuco, I suspected that many of the students who intended to teach music are those for whom a performance career would be beyond reach. They enjoyed music, but did not have access to the resources necessary to become polished and virtuoso performers. While the vestibular (entrance) examinations are challenging, once accepted, many of the music students did not commit to the rigors one sees in music students at the better universities in the United States.

In regards to Paulo Friere’s attempts to connect “word to world,” or teach

children to “read the world,” I did not observe much of a need for this in the sense that music was already an integral part of everything that Brazilian’s did; it was already connected to the world. School music or formal music instruction children received in school (or as part of a community program) did not need any connections drawn. The connections were already obvious to the children. Students attained a level of conscientization outside of formal schooling. While formal training on instruments, or participation in vocal and instrumental ensembles, broadened their experiences, students brought an inner knowing to the learning experience and did not attain it as a result.

On the issue of Freire’s conception of conscientization and transformation, I refer to my personal transformation as a teacher during my month of tenure with the Coro Universitario at the Federal University of Pernambuco in Recife. I approached that experience from my vantage point as an American citizen and as an American trained teacher and choral conductor. Shocked by the lack of reverence the singers had for the care of their voices as instruments, and shocked by the inattention to good vocal habits and technique, I tried to improve their tone production, intonation, blend, balance and articulation. I found myself swimming upstream and repeating the same thing over and over. Finally, folks began to share their frustration with me—an American who was trying to impose American standards and values on them. They explained this as being typical of all Americans in that we wanted everyone to do their best and to be the best they could. In this particular choir, that was not their goal or even their concern. They didn’t care about uniform vowel sounds, perfect intonation, or blend. They simply wanted to have a good time singing. I found this hard to accept, but by the

end of my trip it put much of what I had seen throughout my time in Brazil into perspective.

There was clear evidence that the perceived benefits of music instruction stretched beyond a well-produced sound in performance for the people of Brazil. For example, the movement away from art music in Rio toward popular music and community singing in company choirs, or the notion that singing in the choir improved muscle tone, confirmed this. There was also the belief that singing in the choir would teach folks how to work together, rather than to make music that was artistic or of high standards. The experience caused me to reflect considerably and in some ways it transformed or changed me as a teacher and conductor.

## **Conclusions**

At the outset of the study, I expected to find music taught in the schools of Brazil as it is in schools in other countries around the world. Instead, I found that because music functioned as an integral part of the culture outside of school, it was not addressed formally inside school curricula. Children had a natural propensity towards rhythm and movement, and therefore came to school already able to play the most complex of rhythms without the need of formal instruction. Even children playing band and orchestral instruments played music of their own culture. In the extension programs where I observed classes, guitar and native Brazilian drumming were the most popular instruments studied. In the community choruses, singers wanted to sing popular tunes.

On my last afternoon in Recife, a friend picked me up to take me to buy some CDs of MPB (Musica Popular Brasileiro). Since she was in the university choir, I asked her what the choristers thought of my time with them. The ride to and from the mall was interesting. She reported that the general feeling was that they did not do a very good job in the concert we performed and that they felt unprepared. She said that many complained that there were a number of culture differences causing some confusion as to expectations on both sides. One singer, she reported, said that she was insulted that I did not speak better Portuguese. She felt that all Americans thought that everyone should speak English and that was offensive to her. Another, who did speak English, felt that I was typical of all arrogant Americans. For that reason, he refused to sing in the concert. Some felt I pushed them too hard. Again, the notion that the choir did not need to be good, but that they should just have a good time, reappeared.

Later in the day, I spoke to the choir's regular conductor and asked him for his reactions and thoughts about my work with the choir. He did not share my belief that choir members talking to each other throughout the rehearsal were rude, but rather a cultural difference. He also showed no concern for their declining vocal health and wrote that off as "just the way it is here."

Despite all this, Brazilians love music. They sang without fear, excuse, or inhibition. They played drums and guitars as naturally as one walks or runs, and they taught themselves without regard for method, structure, and the regular critique of a teacher. They are proud of their folk traditions, such as the maracatu, and of MPB. Folks gave up their lunchtime to sing in the choir at the University in Recife and devoted time in their week to working with

young people, for little or no pay, because they believed that being a musician would be the track to a better life.

Earlier in the week, I received an e-mail from the teacher of the band I saw in Alvorada, just outside of Porto Alegre. Apparently, he found my website, read my journals, saw the pictures and looked at the videos—particularly the clip that showed him working with the students there. He wrote:

Hello, teacher.

I am happy and grateful [to find you on] the Web. I'm just now reading some publications about your work, beautiful work, and your visit in Brazil.

We [were] introduced in Alvorada, my name is Leandro – the Big Group's (grupão ou construção) conductor. It's curious: Watching your videos, I could see a little of the real activities that we do everyday – and that we can't see so clearly. It occurs for many reasons: administration problems, low investments in music education, and personal reasons. We know about many problems, but the most important [thing] is we know that teachers and students can have fun musical experiences together, learning how to “speak” a new language. Neither the teacher's language, nor the student's language, but a “construction communication.”

We didn't expect that a simple visit could make [us] reflect about our own practice (and reality). We can learn and teach all the time,

without knowing about this.

Thank you, and make contact with us,

Leandro Maia  
projeto ouviravida

In my answer to him, I wrote:

Sometimes being rich is not just about money. In so many ways, the children in your project are much wealthier and richer than those who have lots of money. What you and your colleagues are giving them is priceless.

I count you among those special people who make the world just a bit better.

In reflecting over the three months, I have to wonder how I changed or was transformed and what I would bring back to my students in the University here. Certainly a view that music exists in a social context that is sometimes independent of formal schooling is a valuable concept. To instill in the children going to schools in urban America the hope that the study of music can lead to a more fulfilling life, is an ideal that would be well served here as well.

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