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ARTICLE

Where neoliberalism and neoconservatism meet: the inception and reception of a Model Music Curriculum for English Schools

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Abstract

Neoliberalism and neoconservatism are two political ideologies that currently shape state directives for education in many countries. In this article, I describe the confluence of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies that led to the introduction, by the English state department for education, of a Model Music Curriculum for schools. I describe how neoliberalism has transformed the music education 'ecology' in England and created an environment that was receptive to the introduction of a curriculum on neoconservative principles. I consider the current position of progressive music education and why it seems unable to mount a sufficiently persuasive challenge. I make a case for the importance of analysis that explicitly focuses on political ideologies and their present-day rhetoric and discourses. Finally, I point to the general early years sector in England as an illustration for how to respond to state interventions in curriculum that might be emulated by the music education sector.

Keywords: Neoliberalism; neoconservative; model music curriculum; politics in music education

Introduction

The New Right, holding political power in many countries, has brought together two political ideologies, neoliberalism and neoconservatism. While the consequences of neoliberal marketising policies in education have received substantial attention (see for example, Ross & Gibson, 2007; also Giroux, 2004, 2008, 2021), the impact of neoconservative ideology, particularly its impact on the curriculum, has so far been relatively neglected (Yandell, 2017). In this article, I discuss the confluence of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies as the backdrop to the initiation, introduction and reception of a Model Music Curriculum for 5- to 14-year-olds (henceforth MMC) for English Schools. While social media debate focused on the MMC when it was issued was forthright, the more formal, published responses, were, by and large, polite and even-handed. Moreover, any critique tended to remain at the surface level of curriculum structure, content and pedagogy but did not penetrate deeper. By not exposing and tackling the underlying political dimension within the context of the current 'ecology' for music education, I suggest the responding debates have had little purchase on the core issues. They have not exposed the motivating, neoconservative values behind the inception of the curriculum to scrutiny nor how neoliberalism has created a music education environment in which influential actors have acted as accomplices (albeit maybe unwitting accomplices) to such ideologically driven initiatives. I suggest we should heed Woodford who, drawing on Chomsky, writes that the 'masking of politics and ideology in education is among the primary mechanisms of social control' (Woodford, 2019: 21).

The dominance of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies, and their confluence, is not confined to the UK. While the discussion I present is mainly conceptual, and therefore I hope

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will have wider international relevance, it takes the recent publication of the English MMC as its empirical source. The issuing of this music curriculum is symptomatic of broader international trends in educational policy-making. This discussion highlights the relationships between ideology, knowledge and power representing the interests of particular social groups and the linked interests of commercially orientated music education individuals, organisations and institutions. To inform the article, I have gathered up the relevant official documents and the articles and blogs issued in response, tracked social media discussions and interviewed two people who were closely involved in the curriculum development process. Those interviews adhered to procedures of consent and confidentiality in accordance with ethical guidelines for research issued by the Centre for Research in Early Childhood, Birmingham.

One factor that contributes to the present situation, in my view, is that progressive music education with its critical theory influences has lost its way or rather, it has been out-manoeuvred by the strategies of neoconservatives, as I will explain later in the article. As a result, scholarship has not kept in step with recent changes in how education policy decisions are made, where and by whom. Taking my lead from Apple (2004, 2006, 2013), I urge critical theory educators to rely less on referring to retrospective models of progressive music education and less on a language of ideals and possibility but instead to employ pragmatic analyses that address the realities of the current music education situation. In particular, analysis might focus on how current political actors use various rhetorical appeals (common-sense, co-option, distortion through caricature and exaggeration of certain educational practices, deliberate divisiveness and emotionality). This focus of analysis will, I propose, enable critique that will have more purchase and generate narratives for alternative possibilities. Finally, I call for organisations that free themselves from the effects of neoliberalism – that is, market forces and new managerialism – and mobilise, collectively, to critique political directives. I turn to the early years sector in England as an example of this in practice.

In these next three sections, I outline the ideological context as the backdrop to the discussion that follows.

Neoliberal ideology

As is now well understood, the political ideology of neoliberalism is marked by the marketisation, commodification and degradation of education (Giroux, 2004; 2008). Under neoliberalism new entities were created in education. Music education in England transformed into a market place where the state and private sector, 'edu-businesses' and philanthropic organisations work in partnerships and networks. A plural, fragmented array of diverse actors and agencies emerged within networks of mediating partnerships (Ball & Junemann, 2012). A new set of actors: the funder, commissioner, contractor, the evaluator, the project manager and music education gurus, often charismatic performers, are now driving developments in music education. Music education policy is being made and enacted in new spheres of activity, by these new actors and articulated through discourses that are either existing discourses refashioned or imported from other spheres. New kinds of relationships (networked contacts, freelance contracts, partnerships, hubs and social enterprises) have been developed, and some key concepts such as knowledge, creativity, learning and inclusion have been reworked in the process. These actors have adopted neoliberal organisational principles that encourage a view of working practices that are business-like: technical, pragmatic, politically neutral and concerned with vested interests as a priority.

Neoliberalism has had further effects. At the same time as encouraging these structures and management systems, it has deliberately weakened certain sites of expertise that were, in the past, politically influential such as university education departments, teaching unions and, specific to the UK, advisory teachers working in local regions (Crouch, 2016). These sites of expertise have been replaced by new institutions. Readers located in England will recognise these as the Office for

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Standards in Education, the Institute for Teaching, the Arts Council through its control of localised music education coordinating organisations (music hubs), school-based initial teacher education and new centres of influence such as privatised music education providers. These changes have created a particular professional environment – and altered the dynamics and balance of power within policy-driven music education – an environment that I argue, as a key point I develop in this article, is accepting, perhaps blindly, of neoconservative educational initiatives.

Neoconservative ideology

Neoconservatism, broadly speaking, is concerned with tradition, order, control and hierarchy and has been influential on education for some years, prominently so in other curriculum areas such as history and literacy. According to neoconservative thinking, culture is seen as a fixed body of knowledge inherited from the past and the function of education is to pass on this knowledge. In educational practice, neoconservatism advocates a return to 'traditional' education consisting of real subjects, core knowledge, a teacher-centred pedagogy, strict discipline and academic-vocational divisions with often an implied emphasis on character education. It demands unquestioning support for an unchanging canon and has the aim of reconnecting the work of schools to dominant intellectual traditions. Following this route children, it is argued, gain access to 'powerful knowledge' which enables them to make systematic sense of academic disciplines.

A key strand of the neoconservative rationale is that progressive educational ideas have been responsible for denying children access to core knowledge. The consequence, it is suggested, has been to withhold from children, particularly children from disadvantaged social groups, a key to social mobility, thereby increasing their disadvantage. This set of ideas around powerful knowledge and education as transmission are presented as good, down-to-earth common sense that has been obscured by the tyranny and follies of progressive educational theories. Common sense educational thinking – an uncluttered, intuitively obvious, plain-speaking approach – is presented in sharp opposition to intellectual, academic and progressive educational theory supposedly promulgated by educationalists, particularly academics in university departments (Lepistö, 2021). A characteristic of the neoconservative view is an unwavering certainty. It sweeps aside genuine intellectual dilemmas, debate and conflict with a form of projected consensus based on common sense. It gives validity to these views while simultaneously and deliberately excluding any intellectual, liberal and counter-culture thinking (Lepistö, 2021). Neoconservative educational thinking thus embodies a curious contradiction. On the one hand, it emphasises the anti-intellectual, 'low culture' common sense of 'the people', but at the same time, values elite intellectual tradition and its high culture values.

Ideological confluence

As stated earlier, while many have elucidated and critiqued the dominance of neoliberalism in education, the confluence of neoliberalism with neoconservatism in driving education policy-making has received less attention. Yet, there is no more apt example of this ideological interconnection than the initiation, publication and reception of the MMC.

In many respects, neoliberalism and neoconservatism hold contradictory principles. Unlike the neoliberal emphasis on the weak state, neoconservatives are guided by a vision of the strong state. Neoliberal policies have dispersed music education provision to a wide range of new providers and given them a degree of autonomy. At the same time, neoconservative policies have attempted to centrally dictate what counts as knowledge through direct regulation of the curriculum. So on the one hand there is the neoconservative process of 'cultural restorationism' (Ball, 2021), traditional, retrospective and unified and on the other, the neoliberal process of marketisation; innovative,

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contemporary, diversified and individualistically competitive. This combination of authoritarian centralisation of the curriculum with market forces shaping the institutional structures and workings of music education is a particular formation of recent conservative education policy in England.

The Model Music Curriculum, the minister and Hirsch

The MMC is a clear example of a neoconservative attempt to gain strong control over legitimate music knowledge. It was initiated in 2019 by the Schools Standards Minister for England, Nick Gibb (DfE, 2021). As would be expected of a neoconservative politician, the minister appointed the working panel made up of people he was confident would uphold his traditionalist ideas of music education – rather than ensuring representation from all walks of music education. The panel was, therefore, set up as a means for enacting policy and for avoiding certain established public sector music education interests and lobbies. So from the start the panel appointments represented an authoritarian attempt to impose a curriculum and subvert democracy by limiting membership, preventing consultation and stifling dissent.

Nick Gibb relied heavily on the ideology of the neoconservative New Right in the US, the work of Hirsch and the Core Knowledge Movement (Gibb, 2015a). Hirsch has argued passionately that schools should teach a highly specific, knowledge-based curriculum, referred to as the most hopeful alternative to '*dead-end*' progressive education (Hirsch, 1996; 2006). A curriculum of hard facts based on the roots of 'cultural literacy', as Hirsch terms it (2006), has gained significant traction in England's schools. Hirsch's most popular books essentially argue that if children understand the basic 'communal knowledge' shared by most of society, they will have better life chances (Hirsch, 1996). He has argued that working-class students in the US were being offered a reduced curriculum which had been stripped of crucial elements of what he terms cultural literacy and that a socially just education system required a curriculum rich in historical and cultural knowledge to be implemented in all schools nationwide. Hirsch also argued that children need to learn these facts in a highly organised, sequential way, starting with the basics. His views have been directly and enthusiastically referenced by Nick Gibb in both his publications and public speeches (e.g. Gibb, 2015a, 2015b). It should be noted, however, heeding Muller and Young (2019) that Gibb has selectively interpreted the work of Hirsch in terms of content only, by-passing Hirsch's emphasis on the systematic knowledge that gives a discipline its coherence. This knowledge without system leads to content lists that lack genuine progression based on the development of conceptual understanding.

As a guiding compass for his planned Model Music Curriculum, Nick Gibb quoted his own choirboy experiences and his encounters with pieces from the classical repertoire.

> *Being familiar with the best known classical works is as important as reading the canon. Music has been important to me personally and my suggestions for pieces to include would range from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to Parry's setting of 'I was glad' and Allegri's 'Miserere', which I still remember singing as a choirboy. I very much hope there will be strong engagement from those within music teaching with . . . Classic FM as they develop the list. (Nick Gibb, speech to music Education Expo, 2015b)*

To construct a mythic past is a key strategy for neoconservatism. Here it is powerfully represented through a nostalgic construct, the coded image of a white, male-centric Christian choirboy and a form of elite, disciplined music education. Gibb offers his reverence for pieces from the canon of Western art music that are assumed to hold an unquestionable authority and cultural superiority. His references to the past imply that contemporary education has declined and important cultural values have been lost. Those values carry social class and moral overtones. This is an idealised past

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in which 'real music' reigned supreme, and traditions such as choirboy training provided stability. The formula is simple. What is needed, in the face of this decline, is a restoration of past values via a tightening of control over the content of curriculum.

> *I want every child to leave primary school able to read music, understanding sharps and flats, to have an understanding of the history of music, as well as having had the opportunity to sing and to play a musical instrument* (Gibb, 2019)

We may marvel at the arrogance of Nick Gibb in his assumption that his biographical experiences and his personal enthusiasms and biases entitled him to make policy decisions for the music education of all English children. He announced that he didn't want children to be 'tied to their Spotify lists' (Gibb, 2019) with all the sneering superiority that statement carries, but fails to see that they are to be tied instead to his own choirboy list. Children listening to Spotify lists are cast as the 'others' of policy who need to be saved from their impoverished musical pursuits. Yet, underlying the neoconservative thrust in education and in social policy in general is not only a call for a return to mythologised traditions of the past. Here, in true neoconservative style, Nick Gibb is calling up nationalistic traditions that are middle class, ethnocentric and male-centric. Inevitably, in valuing the educational background of one class, the knowledge and experiences of other social classes and ethnic minorities are devalued (see also Hess 2021). Contrary to the claim to 'level up' educational advantage, such curricular principles serve to emphasise difference and disadvantage.

There are two other very obvious problems with the Hirschian conception of curriculum as promoted by Gibb. As Yandell writes, 'In the Hirschian model, knowledge is inert, fixed, stable – ready to be delivered, more like a sack of potatoes than a box of delights, to the next generation' (Yandell, 2017). Yet in reality, knowledge is uncertain, shifting, contested and always interpreted. There is also an assumption that it is enough to specify knowledge and it can be handed on in a simple model of transmission and teacher-led pedagogy. Years of research into learning processes have shown us that learning, whether in music or any subject area, involves a complex interplay of social, emotional, embodied and intellectual capacities articulated with contextual factors and, moreover, that these evolve as children mature. Yet this vast swathe of research and intellectual thinking can, apparently, be by-passed; trounced by the common-sense of simplistic conceptions of educational process and one minister's memories of his choirboy days.

All the complexities of curriculum planning are removed by these assumptions concerning core knowledge, learning as transmission and teacher-led pedagogy. The process of writing a neoconservative curriculum, buoyed up by certainty, has no need to democratically solicit opinion and thereby avoids navigating the knotty issues of present-day purposes and ideals for music education. Such a curriculum could be given over – as indeed was the case – to administrator-managers, solution providers, those who are unencumbered by difficult questions around purposes and pedagogical approaches, but who can be relied upon to fulfil the directive in a quick and efficient way. No consultation processes of draft documents took place. No public meetings were set up at which more meaningful debates could be engaged in. This is most obviously an undemocratic process, for it did not seek insight or advice from teachers, education academics, let alone children, young people or parents. At the very least, a process of consultation on a draft document would have identified the embarrassing mistakes, clumsy repetitions and inappropriate content of the first issued version. For a curriculum that was supposedly 'knowledge rich' and 'world class', it was then hastily subject to a number of minor revisions to correct the most blatant errors.

However, this is only the first part of the story for this new curriculum arrived into a music education ecology transformed by neoliberalism and the new managerialism it introduced. In the next section, I go on to explore this.

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Changing spheres of activity: new managerialism

Neoliberalism provided the economic ideology, structures and processes in the form of new managerialism that have increasingly come to dominate music education (see Ball, 2021). New managerialists are typically middle class, educated to university degree level and have a portfolio of varied experience. But that experience rarely includes a substantial period of direct teaching in schools. Managers bring expertise and efficiency in areas they describe as organisation, communication, systems and evaluation. They are 'doers' and initiative takers. Anthropologist Tania Murray Li (2007) terms this approach 'rendering technical' which means framing problems and their solutions in a way that lends itself to technical fixes without addressing root issues such as underlying political ideologies and the interplays of power. Thus, 'rendering technical' removes central aspects of policy-making that relate to people, power and politics. These managerial skills have enabled those who possess them to carve out spheres of authority, such that they are now frequently heading up organisations that provide music education. They see progress as being linked to improved efficiency through processes of identifying outcomes, measurement and evaluation. They must be energetic and entrepreneurial in seeking funding, finding opportunities and business advantage and seeking publicity and promotion for their organisation, education business, music education products and so on. Among and between them there is jostling for positions of influence and opportunity in a competitive arena.

The rise of technocratic managerialism has resulted in a recasting of who holds agency – and what forms of agency – within music education. And with that recasting, there has been a gradual transformation of background experience, knowledge and perspective (Ball & Junemann, 2012). Fundamental alterations of professional perspective and practice have been internalised, re-conceptualised along economic, technocratic lines, so that certain priorities are placed above others. The new curriculum arrived into this music education ecology. Technical administrative knowledge is privileged. Academic and theoretical thinking is typically viewed as abstract, over-complicating and slowing down what are, at core, issues that require efficient, nuts and bolts, solutions. Criticality and challenging assumed purposes and values can be viewed as unnecessarily negative, even cynical, as identifying problems without framing solutions, and as hindering activity that should be exciting, forward-looking and focused on practical initiatives. Lacking substantial direct education experience, in-depth knowledge of educational principles, particularly the refinements of curriculum design, is often not part of the managerialist professional toolkit. Therefore, the common-sense and simplicity of neoconservative curriculum principles elide easily with a sensible, 'get things done' perspective. Neoconservatives emphasise intuitive, popular emotions and down-to-earth approaches. A list of knowledge and repertoire to be covered in a neoconservative curriculum may seem useful, sensible and uncontentious. It sits comfortably enough with new managers, often with community music allegiances, who respond to the power of common sense, the importance of passion and the messages of equity (in neoconservative guise) working to open up more musical spaces for more children. There is another dimension at play here, however, to explain.

For what was notable, following the issuing of the MMC, was to witness the number of authorities with interests and influence in music education who either remained silent or who hedged their bets, neither dismissing the curriculum initiative outright nor entirely endorsing it. The arrival of the MMC prompted a handful of cautiously worded articles which sought to be even-handed and polite. In the current ecology of individualized educational enterprise, entrepreneurial music education providers must always be on the look-out for an opportunity to get ahead, to gain advantage for their organisation, their school or their freelance music education business. In short, they skirted around the new curriculum asking if it could offer a new opportunity to profit from educational services or to gain prominence and influence for themselves or their organisation? Instead of free, autonomous debate driven by well-informed expertise and direct classroom experience, on democratic principles we have, at base, the protection of individualistic

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vested interests that put economic advantage first, rather than educational principles, ideals and ethics. In a nutshell, intellectual, educational and moral priorities are subordinated to – or refashioned into – economic ones. The dominance of an economic and outcome-measurement approach to value has resulted in an impoverished debate around music education priorities. Thus, the current neoliberal ecology of music education enables the influence and enactment of neoconservative forms of policy influence because outright, principled opposition carries an economic risk. The threat to democratic debate in music education has, at root, an economic source, even if the neoconservative rhetorics obscure this reality (see also Crouch, 2016). This is a key element of the dynamic interrelationship between capitalism via neoliberal market values and the political ideology of neoconservatism.

What many are also aware of and carefully monitor is the diffusion of state control through the network of interlocking relationships. A mode of state control in England has been achieved through mechanisms such as strings attached to funding, specification of outcomes and inspection and accountability regimes. These distributed mechanisms serve to 'steer' from a distance and deliver policy, for example, by suggesting that inspection regimes would look for the new curriculum to be implemented by teachers or that funding to music education providers stipulates adoption of the MMC. Although the MMC is not statutory, as many have been loudly pointing out in order to encourage teachers and music providers to resist these mechanisms of control, some less scrupulous providers may use teachers' fear of non-compliance to encourage take-up of their for-profit MMC training courses and materials.

The defeat of progressivism?

However, understanding the context into which the MMC arrived also needs to take into account the current state of progressive music education. Progressivism in music education has all but been defeated – at least, in public, policy-focused debate. I'm confident it remains alive and well in the hands of individual music teachers, working on the margins. The current situation is a culmination of more than 40 years development of particular ideas in educational discourse, the implementation of policies and institutional re-structuring which have weakened oppositional centres and practices of thinking – largely as a deliberate strategy – to a point where they have become disempowered. However, it is at least partly a consequence of the failure among progressive educators to grasp the situation and to produce an alternative narrative for music education within the present circumstance.

It is noteworthy that the 50 year anniversary of John Paynter's book Sound and Silence (1970), a landmark book in the history of progressive music education, produced a renewed interest in looking back to that era via new writing (e.g. Finney et al., 2020), conference presentations and blogs. Retrospective accounts can tend to overestimate the influence of progressive approaches on classroom practice at that time. However, this revitalised interest suggests a search for firm anchor points for the present day in the ideological principles that gave rise to that educational movement. In light of this article's attempt to focus attention on the political context, it is worth remembering that the progressive educational movement of that time was energised by social and political directions of the late 1960s and 1970s. There was a synergy between political climate and educational initiatives.

Not only is the present political climate not conducive to progressive educational principles. The progressive position, in my view, fails to recognise how one of the planks of neoconservatism is constructed out of a deliberate and aggressive undermining of the progressive position hand-in-hand with a co-option of a rationale for equity through social mobility. The progressive position is, as it were, squeezed from two sides. Therefore, neoconservatism has already inoculated itself against any oppositional arguments and has a built-in set of counter-arguments that are

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embedded in its strategies. Either way, the left leaning progressive position quickly loses any persuasiveness (see also Slačálek, 2021). This needs more explanation.

Deliberate undermining

Neoconservatives deploy an aggressive hostility to diverging conceptions of pedagogy, curriculum and learning that seeks to silence, discredit or marginalise alternative viewpoints. One only has to follow the tweets of some leading neoconservative educators to see this strategy at work. They draw on the tactics of populism in viewing education as separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps – the down-to-earth, common sense people/chalk-face teachers and the progressive 'elite' educators (see Watson, 2021). The far right adopts a loose, linguistic freedom so that 'progressives' or 'the woke' encompass a broad range of educators and groups who are deemed to be opposed to their view of education. The arguments of right wing educators, often conducted on social media or in blogs, and adopting the tone and bluntness of those media, aim to point out the follies of progressive education (Watson, 2021). Progressivism is described in terms of its supposed naivete and foolishness and mockingly caricatured in a way that bears little connection to the reality of classroom practice. The simplistic, exaggerated depictions of progressive practice overlook the fact that these educational ideas are sprawling and wide ranging. Practice that is in reality, complex and fuzzy is reduced and polarised. In post-truth style, however, the accuracy of the depictions remains unimportant (McIntyre, 2018). The need for truthfulness is replaced by the need to create a caricature that is so patently ridiculous that it arouses emotion and can be immediately denounced – a familiar strategy of populist politics (Slačálek, 2021). The caricature is then replaced by narratives of plain-speaking, self-evidently sensible approaches to education. As a strategy, it is designed to generate confrontation laced with emotionality and undermines efforts to find a considered, liberal middle ground based on accurate information and cool, reasoned deliberation. Progressive educators are framed as working against the interests of a hapless victim – the common-sense teacher or the disadvantaged child – a negative force against the virtuous and down-to-earth. Among educationalists aligned with neoconservative principles what we see is a call for strong leadership and strong intervention to defend against the entirely imagined threat of progressive educational ideas.

Co-opting of arguments

An alternative right wing strategy is to absorb, co-opt and twist the arguments of the opposition. Progressivism has been accused of introducing curricula which are responsive to children's own interests and cultural backgrounds with negative consequences. As explained earlier, neoconservatism offers what seems to be a straightforward argument for traditional knowledge to serve as a means of securing social mobility. On the surface, therefore, it can appeal to progressive thinking as a strategy for equality and fairness. The argument of social justice is reworked to gain a new political function, but this politicising of the argument may not be recognised by those who adopt its discourse of equity and cultural capital.

The MMC recommends that children learn traditional musical skills such as notation, music theory and to play an orchestral instrument alongside knowledge of a fixed, repertoire of 'good' music. Access to these conventional forms of knowledge rooted in Westernised cultural traditions will, it is claimed, lift all children, including those from disadvantaged social groups, to new intellectual levels and open the doors to new occupational opportunities. Through re-iteration of the mantras of knowledge-rich and an adoption of the term 'cultural capital', echoed by the Office for Standards in Education and picked up by commercial providers of training and resources, this idea is continually reinforced.

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There are strong counter-arguments, but they are unpalatable politically which is why they are suppressed. The social mobility argument conveniently overlooks the accumulated understanding that has been long researched, theorised and debated in the sociology of education (e.g. Bernstein, 2000). These theories point out that pursuing social justice in education entails far more than access to a certain form of knowledge. They explain that the causes of inequality and disadvantage are structural and reside in the effects of decades of neoliberal policies. These policies have created greater disparity of income and dismantled public services, including education. To suggest that an education in 'powerful knowledge' can compensate for structural inequality relates to the individualising of poverty and the myth of meritocracy – that it is the responsibility of individuals to work harder and achieve more (Sandel, 2020). It conveniently elides cultural capital with economic capital, as if possession of formal knowledge can somehow convert, magically, into possession of economic capital. Thus, neoconservatism defends and upholds a traditional music education in which inequality and injustice is a precondition, inbuilt and inevitable.

A further point to insert here is that even if that conversion were somehow possible, the possession of economic capital is a narrow, impoverished aim for education. In a post-pandemic, climate emergency world, care for one another and for the planet should be the supreme aims for education, hardly a continuation of the capitalist, economic system that has got us into this mess in the first place.

The need for new perspectives

In looking for possible ways forward, I turn to Apple who, writing from the position of critical pedagogy, suggests that progressive educators need to come to grips with the changing ideological conditions.

> '*Critical pedagogy cannot and will not occur in a vacuum. Unless we honestly face these profound rightist transformations and think tactically about them, we will have little effect either on the creation of a counter-hegemonic common sense or on the building of a counter-hegemonic alliance*'. (Apple, 2004: 12)

Apple goes on to suggest that critical educators have not been

> '*sufficiently connected to the ways in which the current movement toward what might best be called conservative modernization (Apple, 2001) both has altered common sense and has transformed the material and ideological conditions surrounding schooling. It thereby sometimes becomes a form of what might best be called romantic possibilitarian rhetoric, in which the language of possibility substitutes for a consistent tactical analysis of what the balance of forces actually is and what is necessary to change it* . . . ' (Apple, 2004: 14)

In other words, progressives typically try to offer a radical vision of how things should be rather than how they realistically could be. There are two aspects to a practical way forward, according to Apple, a 'counter-hegemonic narrative of common sense' and a 'counter-hegemonic alliance'. For an example of how this might realistically happen, we can look to the general early childhood sector in England.

Counter-hegemonic strategies: the early years sector as example

The early years education sector in England were faced with a similar situation in which the government re-issued a guidance document that, although non-statutory, was central to early childhood educational practice. The sector viewed this as interference that aimed to move practice

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in a particular, politically motivated, direction. The sector quickly mobilised, forming a coalition of leading early years organisations and drew up an alternative non-statutory document. I attended a conference day which was part of this process. Although early childhood organisations and the perspectives and principles they hold vary considerably, they gradually coalesced around a shared ideal, that of placing the child at the centre. Notably, the coalition was led by experts who straddle the practice-academia worlds. The shared ideal is rooted strongly in progressive and long-standing philosophies and theories of early childhood practice. At the same time, it carries symbolic and emotive meaning that increase its direct appeal, thereby strategically reflecting the shift in style of populist politics. From this shared, straightforward priority an alternative, guiding 'narrative of common sense' (to use Apple's term) emerged. Moreover, the many organisations represented were willing to form a tactical alliance across differences and to subsume their diverse perspectives to one overarching ethical framework in order to address this larger, pressing issue of mutual concern. The coalition of organisations has drawn up alternative documents and made them public, as a pragmatic response, a material reality and a direct, oppositional challenge to those produced by the government.

Liberal-minded progressives tend to hold firmly to the belief that discussions based on reason and research will be convincing to wider audiences. Populism as a form of rhetoric seeks to be persuasive by appealing to emotion and to common-sense – and also by inviting us to engage in oppositional mudslinging. Certainly, I do not wish to encourage mudslinging, but a search for more direct, plain-speaking, less obtuse rhetoric among progressive music educators would, in my view, be strategic. Emotions and clear messages motivate people more than rational argument. Daniel Drezner's explanation of the 'ideas industry' explores this in detail (2017). Altruism, empathy, care for one another and the planet are strong emotional cores that can be appealed to, particularly through music as meaningful, community practice. At a time of trouble, the early childhood sector called up its deep-set altruism in the form of child-centric nurture, but reiterated in simple, direct messages as the political moment required it. The music education sector might do well to emulate some of these strategies while at the same time keeping the door open to rational debate around values and purposes.

Conclusion

In short, the MMC is the outcome of a hegemonic alliance of neoconversative politician, political appointees and neoliberal education organisations and individuals. The geographies of power within which music education policy and its attendant documents such as the MMC are constructed have shifted. The MMC reveals both the power held by the minister to dictate the direction of the curriculum and how that power is dispersed to a diversity of interested parties whose values are those of the market rather than common good. Music education policy is articulated as a set of technocratic solutions to practical problems and as a result education, as Ball explains, is 'depoliticized in the sense that there is no space for debate about values and purposes' yet covertly repolicitized in the sense that a particular politically informed version of music education is being promoted and inserted (Ball, 2021:159). At the same time, the affective aspects of populism, its appeals to plain speaking and common sense, come to dominate rather than considered debate, rational deliberation and the recognition of complexity. The current music education ecology, its discourses, rhetorics and inner workings, needs to be critically analysed so that we hold on to a public domain and an open space for music education debate over purpose, aims and values.

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