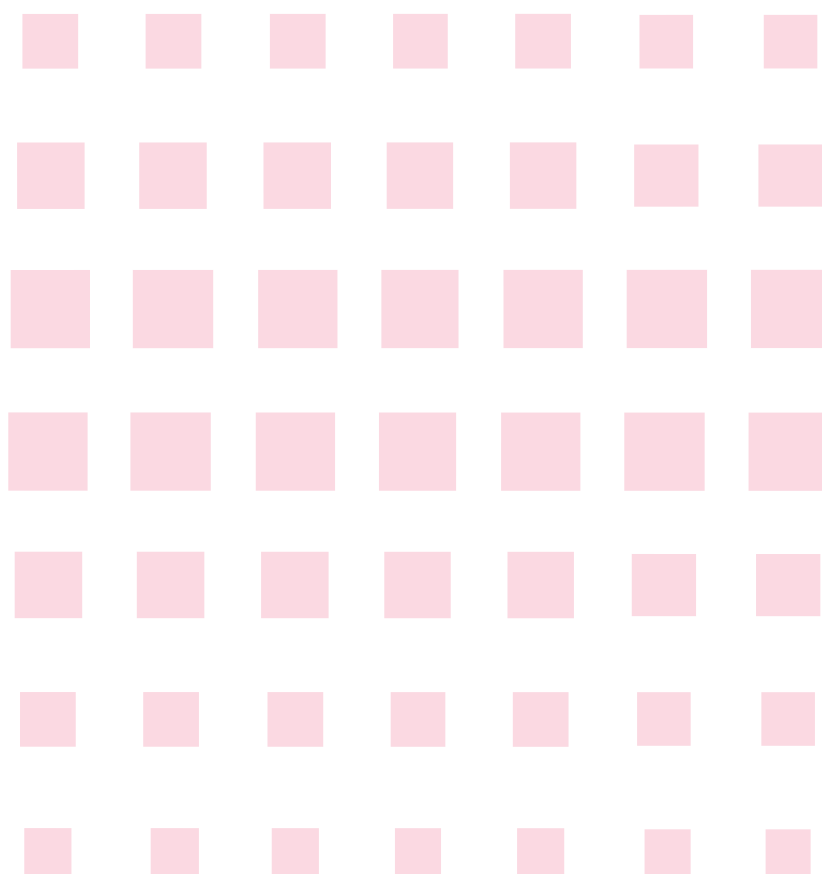


RAISING THE VOICES OF A GENERATION

The Role of Choral Directors
in Increasingly Complex Times

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On March 24, 2018, I stood in my apartment in Washington, D.C., as the city was abuzz with the nation's latest protest—A March for Our Lives, it was called. It was led by students: young artists, creatives, and activists. I stood in awe as I watched a group of young people raise their voices to change the country for the better.

This march was in response to the tragic shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, which occurred on February 14, 2018. Seventeen people lost their lives that Valentine's Day. The survivors moved directly into action, speaking to city government, testifying at the State Capitol in Tallahassee, and collaborating with CNN to host a townhall where student actors, singers, and musicians from among the school's arts programs stood on a national platform and raised their voices with an original song, "Shine":

"We're gonna stand tall, gonna raise up our voices so we'll never ever fall ... we're tired of hearing that we're too young to ever make a change."¹

In a series of spoken word statements during the bridge of the song, the students proclaimed:

"We refused to be ignored by those who will not listen."

"There are so many things you can do to become involved."

"Reach out to your Congressman; mail, call, and tweet."

"Be the voice for those who don't have one."

"Together we have the power to change the world around us."²

This movement captured by their song is not the first of its kind. Only twenty months earlier, on June 12, 2016—during LGBTQ+ Pride month—forty-nine people lost their lives and fifty-three more were injured during the shooting of the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, FL. Only four days later, Orange County Public Schools unified the voices of over 400 performing arts students and teachers to perform "Beautiful City"³ from Stephen Schwartz's *Godspell*. "We can build, a beautiful city," they sang, "yes we can, yes we can."

Working alongside the young people in both Orlando and within A March for Our Lives are a group of adult counterparts—or co-conspirators, even—who are committed to the growth and development of these students. Whether parents, educators, teaching artists, or mentors, we know that these intergenerational relationships enable the voices of young people to be heard.

These moments may bring a tear to your eye or ignite a fire of anger about the injustice in our world, but for me they showcase hope. They exemplify the type of artistic learning, community engagement, and youth empowerment that should be coming from our country's arts programs. It has caused me to wonder: *In our increasingly complex world, how can we best support young people and their adult counterparts to raise their voices and catalyze community action?*

In this article, we will re-think the case we regularly make for music education, re-examine our role as leaders, and recognize a new framework for the artistic education of young people.

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Re-thinking the “Why” for Music Education

For decades, scholars have been redefining the norms of our approach to education in the United States. However, since the industrial revolution, we haven’t actually seen that much reform. In policy, we have seen slight adjustments, usually friendly to the arts, culminating in the 2015 passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, which included music and the arts as one of the seventeen “well-rounded subjects.”⁴ Throughout this narrative, though, the “why” for music as part of the American core curriculum has remained constant:

“We, the teachers, provide, you, the students with a rigorous academic education through music.”

Outside of policy-land, however, the narratives of music and arts learning are drastically changing. In 1968, the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire authored *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a revolutionary work that challenged the very norms of teaching and learning. He argued that students were not “containers” to be filled by teachers, but rather participatory actors in the process of learning. Educators should develop a critical pedagogy, he stated, which allows for educational reformation and learners’ liberation.⁵ Freire’s philosophy has guided the development of arts education in both school and community-based settings to recognize oppression in our society and provide pathways for young people to lead.

Similarly, bell hooks, a more contemporary educational philosopher, wrote her in 1994 book, *Teaching to Transgress*, that the most important goal is teaching students to “transgress” against racial, sexual, and class boundaries in order to achieve the gift of freedom.⁶ hooks’s philosophies have made her one of the most published educational philosophers in the United States, and have guided alternative trainings and certifications for educators in recent years.

A manifestation of these philosophical underpinnings emerged in the mainstream in 2013 when the term “creative youth development”—or CYD—was first coined. CYD is a recent term for a longstanding theory of practice that integrates creative skill-building, inquiry, and expression with positive youth development principles, fueling young people’s imaginations and building critical

learning and life skills.⁷ In a 2013 report from the Wallace Foundation, several principles that guide CYD work were provided:⁸

1. Instructors are professional, practicing artists, and are valued with compensation for their expertise and investment in their professional development.
2. Executive directors have a public commitment to high-quality arts programs that is supported by sustained action.
3. Arts programs take place in dedicated, inspiring, welcoming spaces and affirm the value of art and artists.
4. There is a culture of high expectations, respect for creative expression, and affirmation of youth participants as artists.
5. Programs culminate in high-quality public events with real audiences.
6. Positive relationships with adult mentors and peers foster a sense of belonging and acceptance.
7. Youth participants actively shape programs and assume meaningful leadership roles.
8. Programs focus on hands-on skill building using current equipment and technology.
9. Programs strategically engage key stakeholders to create a network of support for both youth participants and the programs.
10. Programs provide a physically and emotionally safe place for youth.

One can notice the clear ties to the work of Freire and hooks in the field of CYD, which might lead educators to consider a reformation of their pedagogical practices. Yet, why is it that despite these advancements in theory and practice, our policies and the general narrative remain the same?

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This narrative stagnation seems to have emerged from the dichotomy drawn between the intrinsic and the instrumental values of the arts, once articulated in the RAND Corporation's report "Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts." In this seminal publication, the authors examine various ways to interpret myriad studies about the impact of the arts on individuals and communities. They identify a "missing element" in case-making, being the intrinsic benefits—or "the development of individual capacities and community cohesiveness that are of benefit to the public space."⁹

Largely, the data that is regularly cited about the benefits of the arts—or choral education, in the case of this article—fall into the category of instrumental value. Essentially, what our field has been trained to do is to show how choral education helps to develop other skills or capacities. In terms of our work, we know that "music education brings up standardized test score" or "high arts involvement leads to decreases in drop-out rates."¹⁰

However, we as educators also know that when young people are engaged in meaningful choral education programs, they develop agency, foster meaningful relationships with adults, shape the community they live in, and create a vision for a new world. This leads me to re-think the "why" of music education:

"We, the educators, are committed to developing in you, the learners, the creative capacities to solve society's greatest challenges."

Through the philosophical underpinnings of the CYD movement and the ideas of both Freire and hooks, the field of arts education is provided with the next iteration of educational philosophy, which should guide American educational policy and inform the design and implementation of music and choral education in schools and communities today.

Re-committing to Leadership

You may be asking yourself: "What is my role in all of this?" We all have a responsibility beyond our job as

a choral director to also be a leader through our work. In February 2019, I published a new framework for the field, through Americans for the Arts, which articulated the aptitudes, practices, skills, and commitments comprising the "12 Core Competencies of an Arts Education Leader" (Photo 1). This framework is intended to guide all of us working in the field of arts education toward a new way of leadership and evolved approach toward the work of arts learning in our communities.



Photo 1

From 2016 to 2019, we embarked on a four-year journey to engage the arts education field in a series of research initiatives to determine how to ensure an expanded, well-resourced, and less-barriered pipeline to leadership in the field of arts education. We began by exploring the literature to determine what knowledge was published. Unsurprisingly, there is little at the nexus of leadership development and arts education. What we did find provided us with the undergirding concepts that 1) anyone can be a leader in this field and 2) leadership traits can be learned over time.

Through numerous research inputs from existing and new datasets, we found four themes—aptitudes,

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skills, practices, and commitments—that served as the guideposts for the long arc of our work. We also found that a self-predication of mastery usually underpinned leadership competency: one must feel that they already have mastered their individual role within the arts education field (like being a master choral director) on their path to leadership. As we dove deeper, we identified the individual competencies of leadership, which allow for individuals to reflect, correct, or explore to reach their potential.

- Aptitudes—the inherent ways in which we approach our work
 - Collaboration: Working together within and throughout the arts field, we recognize that we are stronger together.
 - Criticality: Seeing beyond how the work currently is and envisioning how it can be.
 - Creativity: Thinking outside the box to solve problems and imagine the future.
- Practices—the ongoing processes that sustain our work
 - Mentoring: Engaging in multi-generational cyclical learning experiences to foster the next (and renew the current) generation of leaders.
 - Networking: Recognizing our own and fostering community among diverse individuals with different strengths to contribute.
 - Learning: Continuously engaging in opportunities to attain new knowledge and stay up to date with current trends.
- Skills—the developed approaches to interconnect our work
 - Policy literacy: Understanding the impact of the implicit and explicit policies that impact our work.

- Evidence use: Utilizing quantitative and qualitative data to illustrate the impact of our work.
 - Storytelling: Illuminating the impact of our work through the real-life experiences of individuals and groups.
 - Advocacy strategy: Formulating the strategies that unify advocacy efforts to effect sustained change.
- Commitments—the obligations that run through our work
 - A love for and joy of working with learners and in the arts.
 - A commitment to social action, cultural equity, and racial justice.¹¹

Within this framework, I would underscore the connections to the previous section of this article: utilizing data, understanding policy, partnering with young people, etc. These are all essential components for how we re-think how we talk about music education and how we inform our leadership in the field.

The field must also focus on the four identified skills: policy literacy, evidence use, storytelling, and advocacy strategy. It is these four skills where we remain stuck in the status quo. As leaders, we must understand the policy landscape that impacts our work—both in the arts and education sectors as well as in adjacent sectors of policymaking. We must use new and innovative evidence to demonstrate the impact of our programs. Alongside this evidence, we must be effective and moving storytellers to illuminate the data. Together, it is essential to craft and adhere to an advocacy strategy—one that moves beyond the age-old tactics and emboldens our reconsidered “why” for music education.

Lastly, I encourage all readers to go back and revisit the two commitments. The words “love” and “joy,” though immeasurable, ground our work in the intrinsic. Similarly, the affirmation of social action, cultural equity, and racial justice, serves as a charge within every action that we take as educators.

I would even go so far as to say that we, as arts ed-

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ucation leaders, have a responsibility (beyond just our students or the young people we serve) to our broader community. Our work is essential in developing young people but also in improving our city, state, or nation. Modeling the type of interaction we hope to see from students as servant leaders must be within our scope of work. Our professional expectations as choral directors goes beyond music training and performance, instead to community leadership and advocacy.

Re-framing the Next Generation

By understanding the “why” of music education and leadership frameworks, we are forced to think in the abstract and apply our experience to the guiding principles that govern our work. But, if we take ourselves out of the abstract and think in terms of the real-world application of these ideas, consider how we think of the young people we work with daily.

My recent research has been focused on illuminating the practices and examining the interactions between young people, their adult counterparts, and the systems in which they work. I have been inspired by the youth leaders I previously described and have set out on a mission to uncover new ways to think about the next generation. Over a year’s worth of research has led me to posit this: What characteristics define creative young people who are changing the world, and how do we talk about them?

The term I have come to adopt is “the Creative Generation,” or Gen C for short. This term builds from a term utilized in consumer marketing in the 2010s, which originally described the “connected consumer” as being one who created, connected with others, and largely consumed culture and media.¹² Previously, I have argued that the same capacities described by the consumer marketing field can be used to reframe how the education field examines the next generation of young people in the pipeline.

I suggest a use of Gen C¹³ to describe an intergenerational group of people who care deeply about creativity, culture, connection, and community.

- Creativity—a comprehensive approach to solving problems in new and different ways.

- Cultural Consciousness—a deep understanding of one’s own cultural identity and a respect for, and often participation in, other diverse cultures.
- Connectivity—a commitment to remaining engaged with peer or social groups regardless of time or location.
- Commitment to Community—acting as a servant leader, regardless of means, to strengthen the communities to which one belongs.

These four capacities, I believe, uniquely position Gen C to solve society’s greatest challenges by leading efforts of creative community change.¹⁴

If we consider that these four capacities—creativity, cultural consciousness, connectivity, and commitment to community—describe the intrinsic benefits of arts and cultural learning (as invoked by “Gifts of the Muse”), then we may have a new frame as a field. This new frame ascribes to the characteristics of CYD and exhibits the outcomes of the undergirding philosophies from Freire, hooks, and the like.

Further, we have great examples of members of Gen C as described in the opening of this article. Young people are using their creative capacities to improve their communities, drive systems change, and ultimately positively impact the world every day. Now, we have a language for it.

Finally, we can examine our own role in this dialogic relationship with young people. As adult leaders, we are now equipped with our own set of capacities to best support members of the Creative Generation as they seek creative community change.

A Call to Action

In the beginning of this article, I detailed how the survivors of the shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School immediately took action with their city, county, state, and federal elected officials. They used their creative capacities to drive creative community action, exemplifying the Creative Generation. They defined themselves as advocates and agents of creative community action. By doing so, they offered all of us adults a *de*

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facto challenge to rise to the occasion. As choral directors, we can—and we must—do the same.

The challenge to the entire field of choral directors across the United States is this: Let us break the mold of traditional choral education; we must recognize a new frame for the music education we are delivering, we must re-think the reasons we are doing this work, and we must become leaders and advocates in our communities. By doing so, we will expand our autonomy as educators, more deeply engage with our students and the community, and, ultimately, we will disrupt the systems that maintain the status quo.

When you think about the change you wish to see in the world—for your communities, schools, and students—you must challenge yourself to become as engaged as these young people have been. Consider the following:

- Do you wish to have more funding to expand your programming and reach more students?
- Do you seek to change a local or state policy that negatively impacts your choral program?
- Does your community need the voices of singers and musicians at the table or critical community decision making?
- Would your state or the nation benefit from further youth and adult engagement around education reform?

This fall presents the perfect opportunity to begin your work. From September 8 to 14, 2019, people will come together to celebrate the transformative power of the arts in education. Passed by Congress in 2010, House Resolution 275 designates the week beginning with the second Sunday in September as National Arts in Education Week.¹⁵ During this week, the field of arts education joins together in communities across the country to tell the story of the impact of their work; it is an excellent entry point for advocacy.

Now is the time to raise your own voice and be an advocate. It begins with you. 

NOTES

- ¹ Watch this video at <https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2018/02/22/stoneman-douglas-school-shooting-survivors-perform-song-shine-town-hall.cnn>.
- ² Jeff M. Poulin, “Shooting Survivors Turn to the Arts in Wake of Tragedy,” *Americans for the Arts* (February 27, 2018). <https://blog.americansforthearts.org/2019/05/15/shooting-survivors-turn-to-the-arts-in-wake-of-tragedy>.
- ³ “‘Beautiful City’ OCPS Students/Teachers tribute to Orlando Pulse Massacre,” <https://youtu.be/Gn4DGGqB3II>.
- ⁴ National Association for Music Education, 2016.
- ⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum, 1970).
- ⁶ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994).
- ⁷ Creative Youth Development National Partnership, 2019.
- ⁸ Denise Montgomery, Peter Rogovin, and Neromanie Persaud, “Something to Say: Success Principles for Afterschool Arts Programs from Urban Youth and Other Experts” (The Wallace Foundation, 2013).
- ⁹ Kevin F. McCarthy, et. al., “Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts” (RAND Corporation, 2004).
- ¹⁰ <https://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/networks-and-councils/arts-education-network/tools-resources/arts-ed-navigator/facts-figures>.
- ¹¹ Jeff M. Poulin, “12 Core Competencies of an Arts Education Leader” (Americans for the Arts, 2019).
- ¹² Roman Friedrich, Michael Peterson, and Alex Koster, “The Rise of Generation C: How to prepare for the Connected Generation’s transformation of the consumer and business landscape” *strategy + business* issue 62 (2011). <https://www.strategy-business.com/article/11110?gko=17993>.
- ¹³ www.creative-generation.org
- ¹⁴ J.M. Poulin, “Towards an Understanding of the Creative Generation” (World Alliance for Arts Education, 2019), Forthcoming.
- ¹⁵ www.NationalArtsInEducationWeek.org. Americans for the Arts 2019.