

From Humiliation to Empowerment:

Creative Conflict Management in the Multi-ethnic School

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SYNOPSIS

This fall (Sept. 26 2005) we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the birth of the key propounder of social Darwinist philosophy and Nazi ideology in Europe – the physical scientist and musicologist Houston S. Chamberlain. Building on the anti-semitism of Richard Wagner, he set out to rewrite European history (*Die Grundlagen des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*), in an effort to justify racial humiliation, oppression, and annihilation. As the master of Bayreuth, having married Wagner's daughter, his work as a political agitator prepared the way for Hitler. In Vienna Hitler was further influenced by Lanz Liebenfels, whose writings on music and the arts (*Die Blonden als Musikschröpfer*) made a lethal connection between ethnic and aesthetic "cleansing". In these publications slave labour in stone quarries (to be realized in Mauthausen close to Liebenfels' estate near Linz) was suggested as a "solution" in dealing with the "degenerate" race, whose music was declared a sign of their degeneration.

In Norway of the 30ties the Eugenics movement, that was responsible for the laws of sterilization, was spearheaded by another musicologist/scientist Alfred Mjøen, again connecting ethnic and musical supremacy in the spirit of social Darwinist thinking. This racial philosophy led to the enactment of discriminatory legislation directed against ethnic minorities, like the Roma and Sami population, which also involved cultural humiliation and the suppression of symbols of identity (like the Sami Joik singing).

As the new wave of immigrants, mostly from Asian countries, reached Norway in the 70ties this racist legacy was still felt, even with some of the discriminatory practices and laws still in place.

The public policy of assimilation of immigrants also meant disregard for cultural rights and the continuation of a purely Eurocentric school curriculum. The response from the immigrant communities was one of isolation and entrenchment in social and cultural ghettos. Schools were faced with serious conflicts - controversies over the seeming incompatibility of value systems, interpersonal conflicts often leading to bullying, threats and physical aggression, in isolated cases even killings, and developmental conflicts between generations. It led to lower achievement and negative relationships in the form of bullying, harassment and serious victimization built on prejudice and downright racism.

New tools were urgently needed in dealing with these educational challenges. The general belief was that sufficient information could lead to a better school climate replacing conflict with cooperation. However, as leading psychologists (Cole and Hall) point out; “There seems to be no relationships between knowledge and a feeling toward a group, and an already established prejudice is reduced only little if at all by supplying facts to counterbalance it”.

The conclusion from these findings must be that preventive measures cannot be based on information alone, but should confront the irrational and emotional bases of discriminatory attitudes. In 1988 the author approached the State agency for music dissemination and education, Rikskonsertene, proposing a project of music intervention and mediation in public schools based on the traditions of immigrant communities. If music had been bound up with the rise of racist ideology, the author now called upon authorities to use music constructively in confronting discrimination and help implement a program of inclusion and cooperation. The project The Resonant Community, aimed at engaging minority musicians and masters from countries of origin in involving students in 18 Oslo public schools during three years in a program of musical empowerment and sharing of cultural traditions. A listening and music making program built on Asian, African and Latin-American tradition was worked out, and a test program devised.

The test results, showing significant improvement in the social climate of participating schools, reduced incidents of harassment and other aggressive behaviour, as well as improved self awareness of minority students, led to similar projects in other Nordic countries and a definite methodical breakthrough in arts education both in Scandinavia and other countries.

REFERENCES

Kjell Skyllstad. The Resonant Community – A School Project to Promote Interracial Understanding in ed. Barbara Lundquist and C.K.Szego: *Musics of the World's Cultures. A Source Book for Music Educators. International Society for Music Education (ISME)* 1998.