

'If you're a teacher, you're a failed musician': exploring hegemony in a UK conservatoire

Abstract

Conservatoires offer intensive musical training with an emphasis on preparation for careers in performance. In contrast, instrumental teaching is often perceived as a second-class profession or a 'fall-back career' (Bennett, 2012). A pilot study undertaken at a UK conservatoire enabled a group of three final-year undergraduate music students to reflect on their personal learning trajectories via a questionnaire and a focus-group discussion. Taking into account their musical backgrounds and social influences both prior to and throughout their conservatoire training, participants revealed hegemonic attitudes around teaching as a potential career path that were culturally informed, but which appeared to evolve over time. The emerging themes: aspiration/prejudice, exploration/uncertainty and transformation/passion are considered together with Bourdieu's interrelated theoretical concepts (habitus, capital and field) forming a developmental model.

Keywords: conservatoire; instrumental teacher education; hegemony; music education workforce

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Introduction

Ethnographic accounts of conservatoire culture claim that conservatoires train their students to high levels of proficiency in 'principal study' areas such as instrumental and vocal performance (Kingsbury, 1988; Nettle, 1995). However, across the conservatoire sector in England, curricular provision varies significantly from institution to institution with regard to preparing students to teach their principal study instrument or facilitate music-making in others in a broader sense (Shaw, 2021b). The need to continually build a highly skilled music education workforce is becoming increasingly important to ensure the longevity of music-making for future generations of young learners (Daubney et al., 2019; The Music Commission, 2019; Department for Education and Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport (DfE and DDCMS), 2022). Yet, in conservatoires there are 'dominant discourses placing performance [rather than teaching] as the pinnacle of success for a musician [and] it is not uncommon for students to feel 'second-rate' if they redefine their career aims to include activities beyond performance' (Bennett, 2012: 11). Arguably, this hegemonic culture (Bruner, 1996) restricts conservatoire students' wider professional development, not least as music educators.

Hegemony is defined by Darder et al. (2003: 7) as a process through which 'the daily implementation of specific norms, expectations and behaviours [...] conserve the interest of those in power' leading students to be 'ushered into consensus'. According to Brookfield (2017: 16) such 'commonsense' understandings of society are internalised and inhabited by families, communities and institutions, to the extent that, over time, hegemony becomes 'deeply embedded, part of the cultural air we breathe.' These views suggest that society may not even be aware of significant underlying social and cultural influences that cause individuals and communities to accept aspects of their everyday lives without question, and that such naive acceptance may perpetuate or legitimise an unjust status quo. Similarly, Howarth (2015: 201) argues that systems, processes, values and beliefs within societies and institutions are often so long established and steeped in tradition that they are seldom questioned.

In referring specifically to music institutions, Porton (2020: 87) proposes that conservatoires, 'inflict hegemonic power'. Ford (2010: 13) agrees with this stance, suggesting that there is something 'seeping through the walls' at conservatoires that leads staff and students to act in certain ways and adhere to certain values. Indeed, perhaps as a result of the emphasis on development in the principal study area in conservatoire curricula, Ford claims that students tend to be 'very selective' in how they define and perceive the music profession. However, if,

like other educational systems, conservatoires are ‘highly institutionalised [and] in the grip of their own values’ (Bruner, 1996: 32), there is distinct potential to empower students to uncover notions of power through ‘counter-hegemony’ (Liguori, 2015: 124). Thus, the current study details a pilot study undertaken at a UK conservatoire where a focus-group discussion enabled three final-year undergraduate music students to become partners in the research process. In speaking openly about their learning trajectories across a four-year period of study in the conservatoire, these students reflected on their evolving attitudes towards careers in instrumental teaching, whilst challenging institutional perceptions of what constitutes a successful musician.

Methodological approach

Approval for the research, undertaken in April 2019, was granted through institutional ethical clearance processes on the basis that ethical protocols were being followed in accordance with principles outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). Subsequently, in the interests of inclusivity, all 20 students, who had recently completed a final-year pedagogy module, were invited to participate in a pilot study. Students were informed that the study would involve completing a questionnaire, which had been tested to ensure that it would take no longer than ten minutes to complete. The questionnaire was designed to capture information about students’ musical backgrounds and career aspirations. Given that mixed-methods research ‘enables a more comprehensive and complete understanding of phenomena to be obtained than single methods approaches’ (Cohen et al., 2018: 33), students were also informed that the questionnaire would be linked to a subsequent focus-group discussion. The aim of the latter would be to gain student feedback on the questionnaire design to enable it to be refined for use in future research. Eight students expressed interest in participating in the research, giving informed consent on the understanding that their responses would be anonymised from the point of collation, throughout analysis and during the reporting phase. Permission was also granted to record discussions on a password protected device with encryption, again, in the knowledge that, following transcription, any quotations would be anonymised through the use of alphanumeric codes. All eight students (anonymised (S1–8) completed the questionnaire, though five students were unable to attend the focus group in person on the designated day and submitted mostly quantitative responses via email. Given that this paper aims to offer insights into the views expressed by students ‘in the moment’, it focuses on the wholly qualitative data generated by the remaining three participants (S5, S6, S8) who contributed to the focus-group discussion.

A 'completely unstructured [approach], where the intervention of the researcher is minimal' (Bell, 2010: 165) was adopted during the focus-group discussion to enable the researcher to keep an open mind and allow participants to speak freely throughout. The researcher was prepared to include prompts, but with the exception of two questions: '*Do you have any feedback about the questionnaire?*', and '*At what point in the course did your thinking about careers in teaching begin to change?*' this was not necessary, since the participants spoke fluently, responding fervently to one another throughout. The possibility that final-year students' memories of former learning experiences and career aspirations might not be completely reliable was a risk acknowledged by the researcher, along with the potential presence of the Hawthorne effect (Denscombe, 2014), where participants may feel self-conscious or anxious due to their behaviour or opinions being placed under scrutiny, and act differently from normal.

The recording of the focus-group discussion was transcribed manually, and the text was transferred to a spreadsheet to facilitate thematic analysis (Creswell, 2012). Text was read line by line with a new code assigned each time a 'shade of opinion, an instance of the use of a particular word or expression or an implied meaning or sentiment' (Denscombe, 1984: 286) was encountered. Subsequently, in order that themes could emerge from the data, overlapping codes were eliminated and related codes were grouped together into categories to create sub-themes.

Findings and discussion

The questionnaire led the three respondents (S5, S6, and S8) to reflect deeply on their experiences, not only during their course, but prior to commencing conservatoire study. Coincidentally, all three students had been educated previously in Eastern-European countries, and this revealed intriguing cultural insights about their personal learning experiences, and the people they had been influenced by, for example, peers and teachers, both former and current. Indeed, participants' perspectives resonated with Bourdieu's interrelated theoretical concepts of habitus, capital and field (Bourdieu, 1977; Grenfell, 2014).

From Bourdieu's stance (Grenfell, 2014), habitus is defined as a set of individual dispositions that are structured by social experiences. Bourdieu claimed that the way humans behave, think and act is largely linked to their family backgrounds and educational experiences, and

that these bring with them various forms of capital, some of which are cultural and influence knowledge, tastes, preferences, judgements and prejudices. Meanwhile, social capital is accumulated through interaction, and consequently, an individual's habitus evolves and transforms as they encounter new Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Bourdieu argued that an individual's habitus is unconsciously shaped and influenced by the field (or environment) in which they live and/or work and that it is therefore not fixed, but constantly evolving, and an element of competition is likely to be involved.

The primary themes emerging from process of the data analysis discussed above – aspiration, exploration and transformation – are juxtaposed respectively with three secondary themes (prejudice, uncertainty and passion) in the ensuing discussion, and are summarised in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Aspiration (Prejudice)

According to Wright (2016: 13), Bourdieu 'claimed that habitus is subconscious and determines things such as [...] aspiration.' This notion is pertinent since the focus-group discussion revealed that when students commenced their undergraduate training, there may have been underlying culturally informed prejudices relating to the pursuit of teaching careers, that influenced students to aspire to become performers above all else. For each student, it appeared that their desire to be a performer was synonymous with needing to 'be the best'. Participants admitted to a certain naivety at the start of their studies, where the concept of developing a broad skill set (or portfolio career) was completely unfamiliar to them. Instead, there was an evident lack of respect for instrumental teaching as a worthwhile profession:

In Eastern Europe, there's a stigma that if you're a teacher you're a failed musician [...]. I don't think about it that way anymore, but before, I thought that if I just became a music teacher then I was just not very good at [performing]. For me, [England] has a very different outlook on teaching. [In my country] it's not very well respected [...] so when you come to conservatoire and you see that [teachers] are actually experts at what they do [...] you think [...] there's someone who's a teacher and who's a legend [...]. So how you see teaching can depend on what sort of teaching you've seen (S6).

Participant S8 attributed their desire to be a concert musician as being *'the only thing that [they] knew'* upon commencing their first year, and suggested that, where students *'come with that dream, then they don't want to do all the [academic] work that is going to be necessary and [...] might not really understand the importance of [it] until they walk out of these doors'*. Participant S5 concurred: *'If you have a certain background, then you're not even aware of [...] pedagogical ideas [such as] improvising [...] and the importance of practising sight-reading.'*

Exploration (Uncertainty)

In light of the viewpoints above, it is pertinent that, according to Wright (2015: 84), 'the conditions an individual meets in the social space or field are vital to whether the habitus is confirmed or replicated, or confronted and disrupted'. As suggested by Participant S8 above, participants' perceptions of 'success' and what it meant to be a musician changed during their course, creating feelings of uncertainty. Indeed, students had been shocked when their original hopes and dreams had been called into question at an early stage.

When you come to the conservatoire, there's a reality check [...] but then as you become more open minded about your possibilities [...] doors start to open and opportunities will arise [so] you need to be able to [...] play to your strengths [and] look out for skills that could be useful (S8).

Participants mostly felt that the 'reality check' was delivered by performance staff, and thus Porton's study (2020: 86) of 20 alumni, as interviewed across eight UK conservatoires, is highly relevant: 'The principal study teacher was typically seen as the most influential [and] important [figure]. However, the head of department was typically viewed as the most powerful [influence] in relation to [students]' "success" within the conservatoire.'

Congruent with this stance, especially given the power relations involved, participant S6 warned that heads of departments and principal study tutors should handle students' emotions sensitively when giving out this 'reality check':

You come here and you're pretty good. I mean, you're in a conservatoire, and they [say], 'well actually you're not gonna make it. You're gonna have to explore these other things as well and that's also success [...]. If you're eighteen, that's not very

nice [...]. You've got four years to come to that conclusion, so first year is perhaps a bit too early to have that reality check I think [...]. You come here with all this expectation to be really good and then think 'well actually, it's probably not going to happen'. And if you insist, then they [say] 'you're being unrealistic'. So there needs to be a balance of making people understand that there are other options, but not necessarily taking away from their excitement of wanting to be an excellent solo performer (S6).

The above view echoes Porton's finding (2020: 82) that, over half of those 20 conservatoire alumni interviewed 'considered that conservatoire students were commonly pigeon-holed into possessing/not possessing certain musical talents [and that] once decisions regarding talent had been made, it was perceived as extremely difficult for this assessment to be readdressed'. Participant S8 also expressed frustration with such a practice: '*There's this belief that there are people who can [perform] and then there are people who just can't.*' This 'belief' is concerning, given that performance tutors in conservatoires are themselves, by definition, respected pedagogues, who surely aim to nurture all their students, not only as performers, but also as teachers, thus acting as role models. Participant S8 concurred, suggesting that conservatoire students need to be supported by their institution in becoming well-rounded musicians if they are to nurture musical skills in the next generation of learners: '*We need to be able to make a sustainable education system that's going to create capable musicians*'. In contrast, participant S5's reality check appeared to have been imposed by competition from his peers:

[In] my first year [...] I see people with [...] great instruments [worth] several thousands of pounds and I see they're hard working, [have] acclaimed teachers [and] they already play better than some of us will play after we've graduated from conservatoire and I think to myself 'Am I really going to compete with them?' (S5).

This notion that conservatoire students compete for recognition (Kingsbury, 1988) resonates once again with Porton's findings (2020: 14): 'There are inherent social challenges faced by students attending conservatoires, who must find the balance between making friendships and developing professional contacts, alongside competing with each other for position within the conservatoire hierarchy'.

Participants also claimed that they had been strongly influenced by the course structure, and especially by opportunities to undertake a teaching placement outside the institution. It would

appear, for example, that participant S8 experienced a transitional phase where they had gradually come to appreciate the value of teaching as a career choice alongside, or even instead of, performing. Consequently, S8 felt that it was important to:

come in with an open mind and see what's there to explore [...]. In reality, you have to do a bit of everything, and I think it's a bit of a disappointment when that [realisation] happens, but after that, you learn to appreciate it. [Students need] maturity and open-mindedness (S8).

Transformation (Passion)

On transformation, Reay (2004: 435) claims that 'habitus can be transformed through a process that either raises or lowers an individual's expectations. Implicit in [this] concept is the possibility of a social trajectory which enables conditions of living that are very different from initial ones.' In a similar fashion, having grappled with the desire to be a performer and the associated challenges, participant S6 eventually came to a new understanding of, and familiarity with, what being a musician could involve and appeared to demonstrate the characteristic maturity and open-mindedness that was alluded to by participant S8, above:

The transformation I've gone through mentally and in terms of attitude and desire, [my understanding of] what to be a musician is, is completely different to what it was as a first year [...]. I still want to be a solo performer, but my expectation of success and what that means has changed [...]. You come here and you think you're an opera singer or you're a teacher and that's it. But now I think that's not so black and white. [Previously], I felt like [teaching] was an option I needed to explore rather than because I really had the desire to do it [whereas] now I really feel passionate about it and it's not a Plan B. It's more of a 'that's really exciting. I really want to do that' whereas before I was like 'well I guess I'll have to do that' (S6).

Indeed, like participant S8, this student reported a decidedly marked change in attitude and aspiration across a period of just twelve months, having completed a teaching placement as part of the final-year pedagogy module:

I did pedagogy last year. Couldn't care less. I genuinely wasn't interested. I had my viva voce and it was the most painful experience. I had my viva this year and I

couldn't stop talking because I was really excited about the things I learnt and the things I wanted to explore. I changed [and] now I have the passion for it (S6).

In fact, there was a fine line during the focus-group discussion between reflecting on the value of learning how to teach and on the pressure of learning to perform in a competitive conservatoire environment. While S8 appeared to value teaching, they nevertheless attempted to understand why others might find it less appealing, attributing '*being in your own head*' as a coping mechanism:

I think teaching itself is pleasurable, but there are some mentalities that don't allow that pleasure to be felt because you're in your head too much or you don't [like] kids that much. [But] you have to deal with yourself rather than [think] 'oh I'm not made to do this', you know? (S8).

The above discussion resonates with a related study, where employers in England perceived that graduate teachers emerging from conservatoires lacked interest in investing in developing their pedagogical skills. Employers believed that such 'indifference' was due to instrumental teaching not being promoted in conservatoires as a valued facet of the music profession (Shaw, 2021b).

Reflections on the pilot study findings: a developmental model

The hegemonic assumptions and perceptions discussed in this paper resonate with Nettl (1995: 55–6) who suggests that in conservatoires, grouping and status are encapsulated by a frequently heard maxim: "Those who can, do: others teach". However, Kemp's opposing argument (1996: 217–8) that 'what makes a good musician does not necessarily guarantee good potential as a teacher' seems apposite since aspiring instrumental teachers need to build on their musical 'subject content knowledge' by developing 'pedagogical content knowledge' (Shulman, 1986; 1987; Association of European Conservatoires (AEC), 2010; Shaw, 2021b). Indeed, it would appear that through exploring previously unfamiliar pedagogical concepts, practices and Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), undergraduate students can develop the aspiration and passion to become music educators in cases where this was not originally present, thus counteracting hegemony. Figure 1 (below) presents an original model that brings together the emerging themes discussed previously.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

It became apparent through the pilot study that participants began conservatoire study with varying aspirations that were informed, for better or worse, by a degree of cultural hegemony (Bruner, 1996) of which they may or may not have been aware. For instance, it was suggested that to be a performer *'you have to be the best'* (S8), implying that one does not need to 'be the best' to pursue a teaching career. In addition to the teaching styles encountered by students throughout their schooling and higher education, the attitudes of close contacts such as parents, peers and educators towards teaching careers are likely to have a profound impact on students' career aspirations. Consequently, the theme, *'How you see teaching can depend on the sort of teaching you've seen'* (as expressed above by S6) is a recurrent one, representing these underlying cultural and institutional influences. The accompanying 'competition–collaboration' continuum represents students' evolving attitudes to conservatoire life and their developing 'professional self-concept' (Long, 2016: 30) as they gradually transition from a competitive 'inside their heads' mindset and come to terms with the 'reality check'.

The acknowledged 'reality check' appeared to have been enforced in multiple ways: through seemingly cutting remarks from students' performance teachers; via the core modules students were required to study alongside their principal study specialism; and through competitive peer relations. It could even be said that the reality check was a crucial 'pivot point' (Burt and Mills, 2006: 67) in students' transition into conservatoire life. Indeed, it provoked emotional responses in these participants, forcing them to explore the positive and negative feelings experienced whilst studying the performance and pedagogical aspects of the conservatoire curriculum, helping them to 'grow up' in and 'find an identity within [the conservatoire] culture' (Bruner, 1996: 42).

The researcher recognises that participant responses in this study may be atypical, given that all three were from Eastern-European backgrounds. Therefore, it is interesting to note related research (Shaw, 2021b) where three UK graduates, who had studied at the same institution as the pilot study participants, expressed similar views about being 'consumed' by the conservatoire because principal study was viewed as 'the most important' aspect of the

curriculum. Indeed, the following perspective suggests that UK alumni were aware of hegemony amongst staff which tended to be transmitted to the student population: '*I remember talking to my peers about going into something [other than performance]. It was always met with a "well then, you're not taking it so seriously"*'. However, it appears that instrumental teacher training at the conservatoire enabled alumni-participants to forge an alternative identity and career path that suited them.

I wouldn't look at [my degree] that positively and say I enjoyed it that much [...]. I found it a really bitchy, hard environment to be in. It almost turned me off music [...] forever. It was only finding my groove with [teaching] that made me carry on and take different routes. [The pedagogy] and community music modules [were] really eye-opening. Without [those], I wouldn't be doing all the work I'm doing now.

Conclusion

Whilst on the one hand, conservatoires prioritise training in the principal study discipline in order to prepare the performers of the future, on the other, this long-established tradition (embracing entrenched hegemony), presents a distinct challenge and significant impediment to future music education workforce development. Whilst it was evident that the three participants began their course with preconceived ideas about what constitutes success as a musician, hegemonic attitudes about teaching careers were also inherent within their institution. However, having evidently grappled with their musical identities across four years of study, participants acknowledged that achieving success as a musician could and should take many forms, not least becoming an inspiring music educator. As Kingsbury (1988: 56) stated, the 'general understanding that only a small minority of [conservatoire graduates] will be able to make professional careers as performing musicians' is 'only occasionally spoken aloud'. Nonetheless, hegemony preserves the institutional and cultural status quo. In the absence of intervention, principal study reigns supreme and its ideology is tacitly reinforced throughout a student's undergraduate musical training. Conservatoires and other HEIs therefore need to take steps to eradicate disparaging remarks and negative attitudes towards instrumental teaching as a career choice and change traditional perceptions of failure into strong indicators of success.

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Caption headings:

Table 1: Summary of themes

Figure 1: A development model: counteracting hegemony