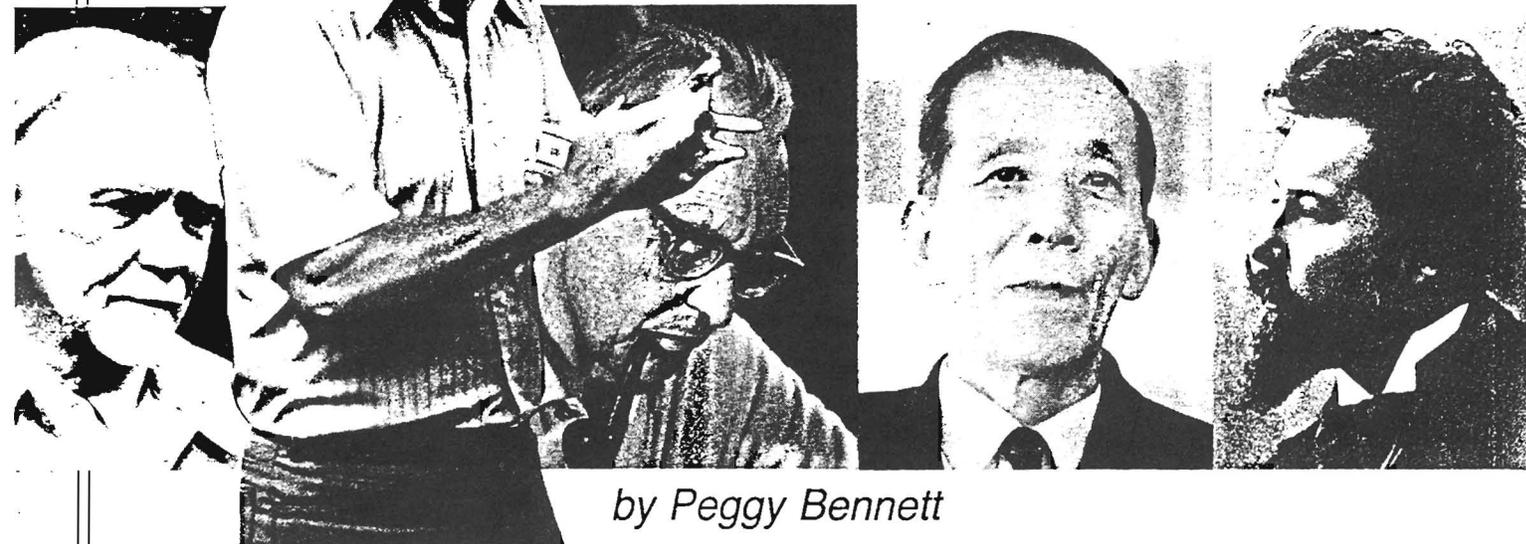


# WHEN "METHOD" BECOMES AUTHORITY

Photograph by  
John Froelich



by Peggy Bennett

Remember the old adage, "Any good idea can be imitated to the point that it is no longer such a good idea"? "That's not an 'old adage,'" you say? Well, maybe it should be.

Good ideas are not lacking in education today. The application of these good ideas into a classroom setting, however, whether by choice or by mandate, seems to be causing some problems.

"I'm a Kodály teacher."

"I can't use Orff in my classrooms; we don't have enough money for instruments."

"My district just adopted Assertive Discipline, so we all handle behavior problems in the same way no matter what the circumstances."

"Education Through Music doesn't work for me. I don't have

room to play those games."

"She must be a Kodály teacher. I saw her working with hand signs."

"We've just been told we need to use the Madeline Hunter model. I don't know how I can squeeze anything else into my curriculum."

"I don't really use any one method; I just take ideas from all of them and use what I like."

## Good idea becomes method

Many teachers, because they like the idea, have adopted a "method" to use in their classrooms. Many administrators, because they like the idea, have adopted a method for the school or district teachers to learn and apply. Missing in much of this adoption is thorough teacher training. Without thorough education for teachers in using methods effectively, frustration and misrepresentation abound.

Short, workshop-type presentations aim to expose teachers to something new for their classrooms and quickly teach them how to use it. Attention is usually focused on the actual *doing*—the "how to" of

an approach. Seldom is there time for any in-depth examination and analysis of what was presented.

When attention is focused on the surface characteristics of an approach rather than the principles that guide its implementation, teachers have no choice but to turn the approach into a method. Following as closely as they can recall the style and delivery of activities, teachers imitate the workshop model. As a result, following a prescribed—or perceived—sequence of activities easily can overshadow the original purpose behind them.

Orff, Kodály, Dalcroze, Education Through Music (ETM), Assertive Discipline, Madeline Hunter, and other titles have almost become buzz words in music education circles. To identify with one method and to demonstrate an enthusiastic loyalty to it may be seen as progressive or, and in some cases, cliquish. More and more school systems and teachers are adapting a specific approach and then identifying themselves by referring to the one- or two-word label for that approach.

*Peggy Bennett is associate professor of music education at the University of Texas at Arlington. Photograph of Dalcroze from cover of Dalcroze Dimensions, by Edith Wax, courtesy of Edith Wax and Sydel Roth, Mostly Movement Ltd., Rosslyn Heights, New Jersey. Photograph of Orff by Karl Alliger.*

Adoption of one of these approaches by teachers or administrators is most often made with the best of intentions—to have a uniform way of coping with behavior problems, to coordinate and organize curriculum, or to investigate whether or not children have mastered materials. As mentioned earlier, adequate training in these approaches is frequently lacking. Even more often, teachers are not asked for their opinions, their understandings, or their particular concerns for implementing the approach. It seems that many of the strategies accepted as beneficial to student learning—considering, discussing, investigating, articulating, applying (with guidance), and personalizing—are ignored in workshops for teacher training.

Without investigating the principles behind a sequence of activities, teachers are not prepared in the subtleties of how to adapt a method to their own students' and schools' needs. Adoption without adaptation means frustration for the teacher and for his or her students.

Mandating adoption without suggestions for adaptation is akin to showing teachers *what* should be done without having them delve into *why* it is done that way. When this is the case, following the method as it has been presented supersedes teachers' following their own logic and intuition. While the concession can be made that a certain amount of narrowly defined sequence is valuable to inexperienced teachers, lasting quality in teaching and learning is rarely the result.

### What is method?

Most of the authors and core developers of the approaches named would probably consider the term "method" an inappropriate descriptor. Other proponents and many teachers, however, view and implement these approaches as if they were comprehensive, "proven" models to be followed methodically, without adaptation.

The stance taken here is that "method" is the underlying logic and purpose for a sequence of teaching strategies and expected skill development. As such, method organizes the sequence of skill development and the selection of appropriate teaching techniques. This

selection of materials and techniques is based on how learning can best be accomplished at each stage of the sequence.

A common misconception about the approaches currently available is that the techniques used for practicing the method *are* the method. Understanding a sequence of techniques (rhythm syllables, solfège syllables, hand signs, tonal patterns, body movements, and so on) is not a substitute for understanding the method underlying their use.

It is common for educators to use the words "method" and "technique" interchangeably, as if they were synonymous. They are not. A technique is a teaching aid which is the *sequential* manner in which (immediate) specific objectives are introduced in a course of study as they relate to the accomplishment of a (long-range) comprehensive objective. . . . That some music educators believe method and technique to be synonymous is indeed unfortunate. . . . Hence, clever devices become techniques in the mind of the teacher. Ultimately, a collection of such devices is defended as a method.<sup>1</sup>

### Method becomes authority

It is possible that "collections of devices" are passing for method in many classrooms. If so, the techniques themselves are authoring the method, and the authority for the method in the classroom is thus misplaced. Regimentation occurs that precludes a teacher spontaneously learning about his students and their learning needs. At times, the responsibility for this pedanticism lies with the presenter of the approach; at other times, responsibility lies with the individual teachers.

Presenters, in an effort to be dynamic, convincing, and concise, often deliver information in such a way that it appears they are suggesting, "This is the way it *should* be done." While it is true that a model is necessarily presented at its best, few clinicians and teacher trainers allow for or encourage teachers to discuss, critique, express concerns, or draw conclusions about the content of the course or workshop. Without teacher critique and feedback, presenters

1. Edwin Gordon, *Learning Sequence and Patterns in Music*, rev. ed., (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1977), 6.

have no information on how their suggestions are being assimilated.

Teachers and future teachers often assume they should use suggested activities or methods precisely as presented. Lacking adequate dialogue with the presenter, teachers are left to their own recall and interpretation for classroom application. Educators either become disappointed when the expected (and sometimes promised) responses do not materialize in their classroom, or they become disillusioned into thinking their students are learning things that they actually are not.

### Losing the good idea

Teachers must have the freedom to adjust their teaching to student learning. The proliferation of an attitude that admonishes teachers to identify with a certain method in order to be current can destroy this freedom. Some teachers may not even know this is happening to them.

When method becomes authority rather than framework, the original good idea in that method is lost. No teacher should be asked to follow a method at the expense of his own knowledge and intelligence. In elementary music education, especially, we have gotten ourselves into the bad habit of representing the whole of a teacher's style, class content, scope, and sequence of curriculum by reducing it to a one- or two-word label. This tendency is polarizing our teachers, oversimplifying their work, misrepresenting what actually goes on in the classroom, and diluting the strengths of each of these approaches.

The "workshop craze" may be doing more to impede the development of a solid method for classroom pedagogy than it is to promote it. In workshops, the dynamism of the clinician and the flashiness of the presentation seem to be high priorities for both the clinician and the attendees. Motivation to try new ideas in the classroom and to attend another session may be the primary values of such workshops. More courses and fewer workshops (or at least fewer workshops that attempt to reduce complex approaches into a series of fun activities) are desperately needed in music education.

Perhaps the state of "adoption without adaptation" in our education system is an unalterable fact. Perhaps it is simply part of the human condition to seek new ideas and believe they must be used in exactly the way they were presented (absolute imitation). Perhaps it is part of the human condition to want to share ideas with others, yet not want others to question or to adapt those ideas (absolute modeling). Is there a way to encourage teachers' adaptations while maintaining the original "good idea" and the integrity of the method?

### Cultivating curiosity

More maintenance and cultivation of teacher curiosity is vitally needed. Only by being curious about himself, his students, his teaching, and his subject matter will a teacher continue to grow and develop. After all, curiosity is precisely what motivated great educators such as those who authored the approaches mentioned earlier. If the education of all people could be systematized into a method that worked for all students and all teachers, certainly it would have been discovered by now. There most likely is no such thing.

Teachers should be selective, thoughtful consumers in each workshop or course they attend, including those that address the approach the teacher has already accepted as the best for her situation. Not all impressive ideas make sense for all students at all times. Conversely, some ideas presented that do not fit an adopted method or classroom procedure are exactly what is needed.

How can teachers know when to maintain their methods and when to change them? A teacher can have a frame of reference for conscientiously evaluating his teaching only by thinking through (1) *what* he teaches, (2) *how* he teaches it, (3) *why* he teaches it, and (4) *whether* it is the most effective way to work with children and music. While helpful to this process, "experts'" opinions can be misleading.

"Experts" are people who study, develop theories and practices, and articulate their ideas through writing and speaking. They have been known to change their minds about ideas and recommendations they

had previously delivered, very convincingly, to teachers. Seldom have experts experienced—and they may not even be aware of—the multitude of contexts in which their ideas are being implemented. The social, cultural, economic, regional, ethnic, and academic complexion of classes and schools are major factors in considering adaptation and implementation of ideas. Custom-tailoring curriculum and approach to these factors is becoming more and more essential to quality education as well as to professional survival. Therefore, "experts" are to be studied and questioned with curiosity, not to be looked to for "truths" to be accepted without question.

### Method versus authority

When should method not be authority?

1. When it, rather than responses of the students, determines lesson plan execution in pacing and sequence.

2. When it is seen as the answer to any variety of curriculum and classroom situations—only the teacher's judgment and skills can ultimately provide the answer.

3. When it is imposed on teachers without proper training and discussion.

4. When it is presented to teachers without suggestions for adaptation, flexibility, and thoughtful development.

5. When it supersedes teachers' need to use their own logic and intuition.

6. When the dynamic, energetic personality of the teacher is considered essential to the delivery of the lesson to the extent that student learning, involvement, and independence with the materials and skills are inhibited.

7. When the attractiveness of an idea or activity is based more on how well it worked during a demonstration than on thoughtful consideration of the short-term and long-term value it will have for the students.

When should method be authority?

1. When it offers a framework from which to study children as they study music.

2. When it gives organization and structure to a series of lessons in

order for them to lead students progressively from one point to the next in their perceptions and understandings.

3. When it gives a logical foundation for working with various techniques that are outgrowths of method.

4. When it integrates a suggested sequence of skill development and activities with the expectation of teacher thought and sensitivity for adapting these according to the teaching context.

5. When it provides a springboard for developing curiosity about self, students and subject matter for each teacher.

### Suggestions

In conclusion, here are some suggestions for teachers and teacher trainers:

1. Be a student of your students.

2. As you attend workshops and courses, develop an enthusiasm for curiosity and selectivity about the content.

3. As you study your students' responses, their pedagogical needs, and their ethnic influences, examine the congruency of your teaching method with those responses and needs.

4. Discipline yourself to be an intelligent, selective consumer of the incredible wealth of choices available to you.

5. Know that at some point, the *addition* into your classroom of materials, activities, and learning tools available can actually result in *subtraction* of lasting music understandings.

6. Be eager to investigate expert opinion and research, yet cautious about the extent to which these ideas are true for you and your students.

7. As a presenter, take responsibility for how your ideas are being heard and implemented. Incorporate ways to aid teacher adaptation, understanding, and appropriate use of the ideas and activities you are presenting.

8. As a presenter, consider covering topics of smaller scope with depth, rather than whole approaches superficially. This should especially be a consideration if a short amount of time is available and there is little chance of a follow-up session with the teachers. □