


SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ENSEMBLE SUCCESS: IMPLEMENTING ALTERNATIVE SEATING PRACTICES

By Tammy S. Yi 

As an orchestra teacher and conductor, I have always wondered how my identities as a female teacher of color could have a positive effect in the orchestra classroom. My life experiences and struggles have led me to think about the problems of race and socio-segregation in school systems, but it was not until I was immersed in the realities of the classroom that I saw concrete opportunities to pursue social justice. One of the most significant innovations in my orchestra teaching has been the creative rethinking of seating hierarchies. I have had to adapt to radically different settings and demographics, and I have seen time and again that more equitable seating patterns—in school and professional ensembles—lead to transformative results.

Fellow orchestra teachers, conductors, and private teachers are often surprised when they discover that I randomize seating in my school ensembles, even for concerts and competitions. Not surprisingly, I have come up against longstanding traditions. I have often wondered about the *quality* of motivation produced by the traditions of chair challenges and seating auditions. I believe that in the classroom in particular, these practices can often create resentments. Unfortunately, these hierarchy-building practices limit opportunities for students to learn about each other. What may seem a meritocratic system often ends up reproducing social class systems in the classroom itself. In my dissertation study, “Back of the Orchestra: High School Students’ Experiences with Alternative Seating Practices” (Yi 2018), I analyzed traditional seating patterns in school orchestras. Students who were sitting in the front of the orchestra had access to private lessons, private tutoring, and opportunities to perform in outside ensembles, which we know costs money, while the students sitting in the back of the orchestra came from families who were usually preoccupied with survival (Tatum 2017). My study also assessed the outcomes of a nonhierarchical seating methodology called alternative seating practices (ASP). ASP is more than an orchestra classroom method; it is a *practice* of social justice. Rae Johnson (2017, 1) has argued that students can embody social justice in the performance classroom while making profound connections to music, and Lise Vaugeois (2009) proposes reconfigurations of the music classroom that develop a lasting awareness of social justice. Vaugeois’s theory of “different spaces” can be applied successfully to seating practices in the ensemble.

Music educators have increasingly become aware of how music and social awareness work together in our students’

lives, and as our society has become even more culturally diverse, it is important for teachers to be aware of the management of physical space and the agency of students. I no longer use permanent seating in my ensembles and the results have been extraordinary. The various practices of rotational and randomized seating have revolutionized my teaching, and after many challenges and obstacles, have led to successful social and musical experiences for my orchestra students. Below are thoughts on how to implement these practices as well as commentary on the social justice dimensions of this practice.

Benefits

Many social benefits ensue when varieties of ASP are deployed in the orchestra classroom. Among those that I have witnessed are shared leadership, community awareness, advocacy, the formation of more diverse friendships, increased confidence, and compassionate learning. It was inspiring to see new friendships form, and I sensed an increased level of compassion, especially between students who may have had mistaken perceptions of each other in the older system. I also observed an increase in technical proficiency and focused listening. Students practiced more frequently and for longer periods and displayed renewed curiosity in the craft of music-making. Moreover, the renewed sense of community allowed students to become more conscious of how they blend with their peers, an important development in their musicianship.

Overcoming Obstacles

If you decide to practice ASP in your own orchestra, be aware that at the start there can be significant resistance from students’ families, local communities, school administrations, media such as local newspapers, and of course students themselves. Thus, communication becomes a vital part of your strategy, especially when school ensembles have been run traditionally for some time. There might be resistance from parents who feel, for instance, that because they have invested in private lessons, seating rank is a deserved outcome. Administrations are often sensitive to pressure from parents. As for students, they may have grown comfortable with their position in the ensemble and with playing with certain partners. Early communication is essential. If you stress the bigger picture—that is, a more inclusive model of education and the expected musical benefits—you will be well on the way to persuading all stakeholders.

There are many venues where you can share your pedagogical values and proven practices with parents, administrators, and fellow educators. Back-to-school nights, parent booster club meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and student orientations are opportunities to begin a collaboration with all stakeholders. It is also important to communicate effectively with all orchestra teachers within your school district and music community. Even when these communities understand the value of ASP, they will be eager to hear about adaptations for the particular age groups, programs, and social settings. You may help to form a support group of educators who share a commitment to collaborative student music-making. Early communication is part of the way a social justice practice such as ASP builds a learning community.

Another conceptual problem is the relation of school to “real life.” Many people think of school ensembles as analogous to, or preparation for, the professional orchestra. I suggest that when you are asked how you intend to adequately prepare children for competitive scenarios in professional orchestras and allegedly “in life,” you might gently advocate that the social well-being of your students is more important than these imagined scenarios. In fact, interactive pedagogies are more pragmatic and future-oriented than the strictly hierarchical ones found in traditional settings. A number of world-class orchestras have been experimenting with alternative seating arrangements, and many successful ensembles have been doing so for years. Serious literature on this practice has been with us for some time. In 1971, Klaus von Wrochem advocated for seating rotation in orchestras. von Wrochem argues that this practice gives every member an opportunity to “find real value” and a “true sense of self-confidence.”

With students, explain that the orchestra requires teamwork built on trust. Be clear about the how enforced hierarchies impact student community, and why imagined “professional” seating practices are not the most useful model for music-making. Even in traditional competitions, orchestras are often evaluated on their collaborative efforts, such as the unity of bowings, musical phrasing, and many musical elements that ultimately come from a *community* of performers, not a collection of isolated individuals. You might find that these frank explanations will alleviate many concerns.

Differing Goals and Agendas

If you look toward the back of a typical school orchestra that does not practice ASP, you might note certain patterns among the students sitting there. Students in the back tend to lack confidence, which can stem from a variety of causes. We can make hasty and sometimes damaging assumptions about these students without engaging with the problem in a consistent way. There is often a difference in socioeconomic status between students who sit in the front and those who sit in the back. I have found ASP to be most successful when it is

introduced gradually. Some students may initially resist sitting the front with increased scrutiny from teacher and peers. Provide these students compassion and care. Avoid singling out students even to praise them and avoid making a big fanfare about the social goals of ASP.

In your groups there will be students who already have well-defined professional goals. You might research groups outside of the school that can provide more competitive students with additional opportunities. Be open to communicating with families and students the reality of competitive environments, and share your knowledge of both the negative and positive aspects. One choice might be to give these professionally tracked students more responsibilities in your ensembles, such as making them rehearsal assistants, but consider this choice with care. Some group members may ask why certain students are spending more time with the teacher and why they are getting more leadership opportunities. Alternative ways to maintain interest and provide challenges for your professionally tracked students include having them learn different parts, such as playing second violin and transposing to different instrumental parts. Patricia S. Campbell (2018, 75), in *Music, Education, and Diversity*, has shown the importance of a reflective practice. This sensitivity can extend to students’ awareness of each other’s strengths. Provide these students with ways to learn with and from their peers by encouraging them to notice the diversity and dimensions of musical ability, especially those of their new stand partners.

Alternative Seating Practices

Below I share a number of seating practices I have used successfully in my orchestras. This is just a sample of the many adaptations and variations possible. It is important to craft ASP based on the needs and aims of your class as well as be familiar with accommodations for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504s. Before implementing any style of ASP, be sure that all students have their own music folders. Be creative in your seating patterns and be open to your students’ suggestions.

Rotational Seating

Rotational seating is the process of rotating musicians by chair placement in the orchestra either individually or in pairs. For example, if a first violin player is seated closest to the conductor, that player would shift to the back of the orchestra. Then after a given period, they would move up a stand, and so forth. Teachers might favor this seating pattern because it gives them an opportunity to pair students of different levels of proficiency. With the understanding that all students can learn from each other regardless of ability, I suggest that you rotate pairs or individuals within the instrumental section at every rehearsal. You can also rotate seating every time you move on to a new piece or exercise.



ASP became so popular with my music students that there was a significant increase in the number of orchestra members.



Scrambled Seating

In scrambled seating, students move around the ensemble regardless of part or instrument. Any instrument can sit in the first chair—whether it is a cello, bass, viola, or second violin player—and can be paired with any other instrument. Students get the opportunity to better understand the relationship between parts, and experience varied combinations of harmony and timbre. This enhances theory skills, inspires musical curiosity, and encourages students to listen to other parts and make musical connections. Like the other seating variations, scrambled seating encourages peer collaboration, a powerful phenomenon, as Richard S. Webb (2012) has shown. This seating also challenges students to listen carefully and address ensemble balance from wherever they are seated. After you have practiced scrambled seating for a while, you can give the students a choice as to where they want to sit and then you might ask them to scramble again after every piece or even during a piece.

Circle Seating

There are a number of circle seating exercises that help students listen and learn from each other. I first organize students in an inward-facing circle, while conducting from inside the circle. Students will have good visual contact, making it easier to coordinate phrasing and physical movements. Then have students sit in different spots after they have practiced a piece together and you can challenge them to think critically about what they hear and see that is unique in the new configuration. Then have students seated so that they are facing outward, while you conduct from either inside or outside the circle walking around. In this variation, students will have less visual capture of the entire ensemble and will have to trust their ears rather than their eyes—and rely much more on the person next to them. After the students have practiced this seating, challenge them again by rescrambling the seats, this time where every two players face in opposite directions. This will require a lot of patience and footwork on your part, but you will see the benefits, especially in their ability to hear and respond more acutely.

Randomization and Its Benefits

I have found the biggest challenge and most equitable practice of all to be randomized seating. I have used randomized

seating in concerts, performances, and competitions so that students can experience seating arrangements that promote equal opportunity and increase proficiency in their technical playing. Many students immediately see results in terms of quality and collaboration. You can continue to emphasize that this is a nonhierarchical orchestra, and since seating is randomized, all students are accountable for their playing. If you have a split class or an ensemble that meets in different periods, this actually can work to your benefit by showing that seating randomization is an efficient way to learn music split over multiple class sections. This can also eliminate the appearance of favoritism for particular players in the ensemble or the impression that you have favorite groups. Keep in mind, some students are “tracked” and you may encounter a class with students who have advanced placement (AP) courses and another that may not. You may encounter instrumentation challenges in your classes. For example, you may have ten cellos in one class and few violin players, or vice versa.

I have found a consistent practice of randomization, sensitively administered, encourages students to practice more assiduously because they strived to be prepared for the dynamic conditions. There are several ways I have used randomization, including phone apps and drawing names from a bucket and placing them on chairs. The timetable for randomization can span from the first day of a rehearsal cycle to the day of the performance. You can also put the students’ names, using the randomizer bucket, on the chairs right before a concert. As a disclaimer, I recommend scaffolding seating practices over time before using randomization immediately before a performance situation.

Off the Podium

I have found ASP to work best when it is practiced consistently and when students understand the system and the rationale well. Remind them that an inclusive, nonhierarchical environment allows them new opportunities to learn and enjoy music together. Students may begin to enjoy the less competitive environment and find it motivating. I would recommend a clear system for communicating the seating at any given rehearsal. As students begin to see improvements in the quality of the music and the welcoming social atmosphere, they will feel empowered to experiment with different stand partners, instrumentalists, and the various seating patterns. Challenge students to adjust and unify their bow technique with their new stand partners, teach them how to listen from where they are sitting, and empower them to articulate their experiences with the new seating practices. You can also provide all students an opportunity to conduct the ensemble while you sit in ASP yourself.

ASP became so popular with my music students that there was a significant increase in the number of orchestra members. I saw new people who had been recruited by their friends in our already inclusive ensemble. These positive experiences were especially effective for students of color and for those who had not had music during elementary

school for various reasons such as being tracked into English language learner (ELL) classes, excessive testing, or being shunted into various remedial programs. Students such as these began joining the orchestra to be part of a community and to seek musical satisfaction while performing with their peers. ASP within high school ensembles has been shown to increase social and musical experiences in the orchestra environment. The outcomes of my dissertation study revealed that students in my orchestras still performed at high standards of excellence, winning competitions and distinguished awards while supporting ASP in our orchestra culture.

ASP is just one example of the social justice practices available for the orchestra ensemble. Practice can be coupled with a progressive approach to curriculum by programming repertoire from diverse cultures, female composers, and alternative instruments. My students began exploring their own creativity and felt empowered to perform their own music. However, changes to years of tradition may bring many challenges, headaches, and complications. I suggest beginning with gentle conversations in classes, approaching the changes with an open mind and an awareness that these changes may take time. In my orchestra class, the students attributed much of their success to ASP and reported that they felt included and empowered. I hope you will also feel empowered to consider some of these ideas with your ensembles.

ORCID iD

Tammy S. Yi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6336-8115>

References

- Campbell, Patricia S. 2018. *Music, Education, and Diversity: Bridging Cultures and Communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Johnson, Rae. 2017. *Embodied Social Justice*. London: Routledge.
- Tatum, Beverly Daniel. 2017. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race*. New York: Basic Books.
- Vaugeois, Lise. 2009. "Music as a Practice for Social Justice." In *Exploring Social Justice: How Music Education Might Matter*, edited by Elizabeth Gould, June Countryman, Charlene Morton, and Leslie Stewart Rose, 2–22. Toronto: Canadian Music Educators' Association.
- von Wrochem, Klaus. 1971. "Movements for Orchestra—A New Twist on Musical Chairs." *Music Educators Journal* 58 (2): 48–52.
- Webb, Richard S. 2012. "Peer Tutoring in Your Orchestra Program." *American String Teacher* 62 (3): 44–49.
- Yi, Tammy. 2018. "Back of the Orchestra: High School Students' Experiences with Alternative Seating Practices." EdD diss. <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8D80TW3>.



Tammy S. Yi (tyi@chapman.edu) is an assistant professor of music education at Chapman University. She holds degrees from Columbia University, the University of Southern California, and Azusa Pacific University. Prior to Chapman University, she was the violin and conducting instructor at Columbia University, conductor of the Manhattan School of Music

Precollege Orchestras, and assistant professor of music education at the University of Arizona (UA) while serving as conductor of the UA Philharmonic. She also taught in both public and private schools for more than ten years and founded the First Children's Orchestra of Harlem and HOPE Children's Orchestra of Orange County.



A STEP TO GREATNESS

REGISTRATION OPENS
OCTOBER 15, 2019

APPLICATION DEADLINE
FEBRUARY 1, 2020

STULBERG 45
INTERNATIONAL
STRING COMPETITION
Celebrating Forty-Five Years
STULBERG.ORG • 269.343.2776