

Music's Role in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

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### Abstract

This paper explores the role of music in the method of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Culturally responsive pedagogy, first introduced by name in the mid-1990s, is crucial to student success. Music, a strong aspect of many cultural traditions, is one way the teachers can begin to integrate culturally responsive pedagogy. Music has long been an oral historical account of cultures and for this reason is relevant in the classroom for its historical, as well as written, value. However, the value it offers to students of varying cultures is worth much more. In order to prepare students to be informed citizens of a diverse world, as some social studies frameworks aim to do, it is important to have motivated and engaged students. Cultural music is a way to create that intrinsic motivation while maintaining student attention through engaging lessons. Music offers teachers a practical way to begin the integration of culturally responsive pedagogy that is supported by many recent professionals in the field and also educational theory. David Ausubel's Learning Theory supports using cultural music that students can relate to and build upon when learning new content material. This paper examines music in relation to culture to suggest that culturally responsive pedagogy should be studied in order to fully understand how student learning can be impacted through cultural music integration.

*Keywords:* culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive teaching, learning theory

### Music's Role in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Educators base their instruction on various teaching philosophies, which are composed of educational theory, individual experiences and personal beliefs. One of the more recent additions to some teachers' philosophies is related to understanding students more fully and incorporating this knowledge to make material more accessible for students. This culturally responsive method of teaching is becoming more and more prevalent in the "teaching hemisphere" for many reasons that will be explained. The purpose of this article is to address the importance of music in education and the ways in which music can help general education teachers be culturally responsive in the classroom.

#### **What is Culturally Responsive Pedagogy?**

Students within any given classroom vary in experiences, beliefs and customs that form their culture. More specifically, students can vary in everything from socio-economic status, ethnicity, race, faith, etc. For this reason, students' culture is an essential aspect that must be acknowledged and built upon in the classroom. "Culturally Relevant Teaching" is a term that was first introduced in 1994 by Gloria Ladson-Billings (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2013). This term may also be referred to as culturally responsive pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching. In the 1990s this was a new and much deeper way of viewing how essential culture is to student success. Others reiterated the importance of culturally responsive teaching. "In 2000, Professor Geneva Gay wrote that culturally responsive teaching connects students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles to academic knowledge and intellectual tools in ways that legitimize what students already know" (Kozleski, p.1). To Gay and others in that time the

relevance of culture in the classroom was not to be seen as a supplementary part of education but rather one that was, and remains, essential to student success.

### **Why is Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Important?**

What's good for one student is good for all students, right? No, this is not the case. Students come from all different homes to one classroom. For this reason, it is necessary that teachers include students' culture in the classroom as a connecting factor between home and life to solidify student identity to promote student achievement. "Each individual belongs to multiple groups defined by variables—such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and religion—that interact in complex ways to make one's cultural identity highly individualized and personal" (Shaw, 2012). It is important for educators to recognize that there are a multitude of environments that students come from in their "home" lives. All of the factors Shaw mentions impact a students' cultural identity and affect the material teachers must integrate in order to be culturally responsive. "The achievement gap in the US often separates groups of students by drawing differences between White, middle class students and their peers who may be American Indian, African American, Asian American and/or Latino/a" (Kozleski, p.3). This is in part due to the Western-European imposition of educational content. In the United States, education has typically been implemented according to a common formula of core subjects and teaching strategies. However, with the growing diversity in population it has been increasingly necessary for teachers to recognize and incorporate student culture through instruction and assessment. Culture is one aspect of a person, so how much of a difference can cultural inclusion make?

Culture can make a world of difference to a child's education. "Geneva Gay described culturally responsive teaching as validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory" (Bond, 2014, p.10). This teaching approach is validating in that it acknowledges various cultural backgrounds, the views of such cultural groups, builds bridges between home and school experiences, uses wide variety of instructional and assessment methods and incorporates multicultural aspects into materials for all content areas throughout daily routines (INTIME, 2000). It is comprehensive by way of creating a family environment in which each student is valued and participates actively to achieve "academic and cultural excellence" through "collective effort" (INTIME, 2000). It is multidimensional in that culturally responsive teaching demands many characteristics of the classroom (student-teacher rapport, curriculum content, learning environment, etc.). It is empowering in that students are positively reinforced with the idea that success is possible and are provided with the supports to make that success a reality. Culturally responsive teaching then becomes transformative when students are equipped with the knowledge and skills to become advocates for themselves and others within their communities. Additionally, it also becomes emancipatory through student recognition of the liberating truth that there are many truths. This is made known to students when teachers make authentic experiences of culture accessible to students. All of these characteristics, as Gay points out, are attributed to culturally responsive teaching.

Culturally responsive teaching is essential to maintaining unique cultural language, traditions, etc. In a time of prevalent globalization, suppression of some cultures and conformity to dominant cultures, there is need for concern that some cultures will be non-existent in coming years. For this reason, it is important to inform and support students through the process of

culture development. Teachers are in a position to assist students in this process. When each culture is seen for its historical, cultural, and individual value, it becomes evident how important it is for teachers to help preserve these.

### **What is the Importance of Music in a Peoples' Culture?**

Music is an art form that is deeply influenced by outside factors and also influences outside factors. To be clear, politics, societal norms, and personal experiences of such factors can influence an artist to create music as a response. Likewise, music can be created by an artist and then generate political, societal, and personal experiences of others. Music is a powerful force in that it can make a statement or forge change. Music is also beautiful in that it can express the truth of something experienced deeply within a person or a people. For its power and beauty, music has been used throughout the ages as cultural expression. In many cases, the lyrics can be an oral story of the hardships, victories and other experiences of a people.

It is both the lyrics and the instrumentation of a song that make it culturally dynamic. In Jamaican culture, the djembe drum is a significant instrument. In Latin culture, the claves are significant to tradition (Mixon, 2009). In Navajo tradition, an indigenous Native American culture, the native flute is significant to tradition (Belz, 2005, p. 29). These instruments may be used for celebrations, ceremonies or other major traditions within that given culture. These instruments are only some examples of the cultural instrumentation that is used among varying cultures. Each instrument has a history and generally those histories include cultural connections.

### **How does Music Integration help Teachers be Culturally Responsive?**

When educators recognize how fundamental music is to various cultures, it becomes evident that music is a vehicle for culturally responsive teaching. Cultural music can be music from the past or present that influences a student's view of him or her- self, their community and their surroundings. There are musical arrangements that have come about over the years and tell the story of different cultures. Through music, the history of a people can be recognized. More importantly, a history of a people can be recognized through the voice of a people during that time. Stories can be told about a people, but stories are generally more authentic if told by the people themselves. This telling of history is done through authentic music of a given time and continuous exposure to such authentic musical experiences. There are many songs in the African American, Native American, Hispanic, European and other traditions. Each song has a historic value to it, but more importantly for the classroom is the value it may have to the students.

It is certainly important for students to learn about many cultures and societies and how they differ. However, what is to not be underestimated is the value that culture has to students.

Students may hear some of the songs of their culture at home. Others may not. Independent of home situations, it is important for educators to show students how their culture has been expressed throughout the years. A culture's music can tell its cultural history.

The emphasis of culturally responsive pedagogy is that culture is an essential aspect of a student's background that must be integrated and inter-woven with the academic material being taught in the classroom. Music is helpful to this purpose because of its many methods of integration and expansive coverage of academic topics. The question of how and when culture can be integrated in the classroom to meet students' development and learning needs can then be

answered with the use of music relative and appropriate to students' prior knowledge and new content material.

### **How can Music be used in the Classroom in a Culturally Responsive way?**

Cultural songs that students are familiar with from home or other experiences are valuable. Prior experience gives the student something to build on when they are learning new material. From the works reviewed, there are three main recommendations that can be made for music integration in a culturally responsive classroom: 1) incorporate native language, 2) use cultural instruments and 3) find time.

**Native language** is an essential aspect of culture. Language impacts the way one perceives the world and is able to express what one sees and how one is impacted by that world. A simple change from singing "head, shoulders, knees and toes" to singing the song in Navajo helps students learn the content of the human body while also maintaining their native language. This is only one example. Utilizing native language in cultural music related to new academic content material accomplishes many instructional tasks through one teaching strategy.

**Cultural instruments** provide a direct connection to culture even through basic, informal instruction in the general classroom. Exposure to these instruments is a foundational experience for students to build off of in the future. Rather than referring to two sticks used in music as "rhythm sticks", they can be introduced as both being known as "rhythm sticks" and "claves". This slight change in instruction exposes children to cultural context of instrumentation. Drums are another instrument that can be used in the classroom and the variations of drums can be utilized to be culturally responsive. For example, snare drums are a general and typical

school-utilized instrument. However, if teachers included a djembe drum in the room instead they can also incorporate (*AFRO-CUBAN*) cultures for the students.

**Find Time:** There is a plentitude of academic content to be covered in the course of each class day. However, this is no excuse for not integrating music with which students can identify.

Music is not supplementary, but rather it's complementary and beneficial to student learning of new content. Music can be used as background music while students are arriving in the morning as a way to introduce one or more topics that will be discussed during the day. Music can also be used more specifically as an anticipatory set for a particular lesson as a preview for new material.

Music can also be used as closure as a review of new material. The music selection is what makes all the difference. "Consider ... using a rotation system" (Mixon, 2009). There are students of many cultures who enter the room, and in order to meet the cultural needs of all students, a rotation system may be helpful. Alternating what culture is being included through music integration will assist to this end. It may be argued that this is not helpful as it does not directly relate to each student during each lesson; however, "Educator and researcher Terese Volk writes that 'today it is generally recognized that students should have both a solid grounding in the music of their own culture and a general knowledge of the musics of other cultures'" (Mixon, 2009). While the teacher integrates varying cultures of students within the classroom, that teacher also provides students with a general knowledge of other cultural music.

Time availability often makes inclusion of new subjects and content difficult for teachers, and thus using a culturally responsive pedagogy may also seem daunting with time constraints.

However, music makes this approach possible without much need for extra time outside of

general academic lessons. Culturally responsive pedagogy isn't new material that needs to be taught. Rather, culturally responsive pedagogy uses material students are familiar with to aid attention and retention of new material.

### **Does Educational Theory Support Music Integration as a Culturally Responsive Method?**

Educational theory serves as the basis for educational systems, including the ways in which teachers determine how they will educate students in their specific classroom. Many educational theories that support culturally responsive music integration. Three of these theories are information processing, learning theory and social learning theory. All of these theories are relatively recent, introduced in the 1990s.

Information processing describes learning in a view of input and output. During information processing information is recognized, stored momentarily in working memory, stored for a longer time once encoded and retrieved successfully at a later time if encoded successfully. Part of storing information is schemas, categories that information can be filed under in the mind.

“Encoding occurs while information is in working memory, often by connecting it to existing knowledge” (Faculty Support for Instruction). Prior knowledge makes it easier for new information to be stored and retrieved because it creates multiple connections in the mind. This also relates directly to David Ausubel's learning theory. “David Ausubel was a cognitive learning theorist who focused on the learning of school subjects and who placed considerable interest on what the student already knows as being the primary determiner of whether and what he/she learns next” (Hannum, 2009). This theory also takes prior knowledge into account. If you think of a closet, it works best to hang a new clothing item on a hanger if there is something for it

to hang from. Prior knowledge is the closet rod that allows that new item to be hung. Music is often prior knowledge students come in with to the classroom. Music is played in homes, churches, cars, etc. and on TV shows, video games, etc. Throughout the years music has been made available for listening through vinyl records, 8-tracks, radio, CDS and now more commonly through internet sources such as Spotify and iTunes. These are only some of the ways in which music has been made more easily accessible to the public of the years. However, music can always be created and observed without these technological advances through live performance. Given the wide range of methods people can use to access music, music has certainly remained a prevalent aspect of culture. Assuming students have access to any of these modes of music presentation, students will have experienced music and it will thus be part of their culture in one way or another.

Social Learning theory also correlates with music integration as a culturally responsive method. Including students' culture gives students "something familiar, relevant, and accessible with which to engage and build confidence" (Shaw, 2012). Social Learning Theory can be broken down into four parts: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. Motivation is that important factor mentioned by Shaw. Students need to have a reason for listening, learning and remembering. This motivation can either be internal or external, however, internal is generally a more reliable and sustainable motivator because it does not depend on outside factors. Cultural inclusion through music integration provides an internal connection to academic material for students.

### **Conclusion**

Educators seeking to teach content in a way that motivates and engages students should consider including integrating music that students can relate to from their cultures. Culturally responsive pedagogy, which was introduced in the mid-1990s by Gloria Landson-Billings as culturally relevant teaching, is becoming increasingly important for educators to implement in United States classrooms and elsewhere. This teaching method incorporates a student's culture and uses this as prior experience to build new knowledge. In doing so, content is made more accessible to students. Music is important in the implementation of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy due to music's importance in many cultures. Acknowledging the influence of music in culture allows teachers to incorporate fundamental aspects of students' culture to motivate and engage students in the learning of new content material. Many in the field of education have explored this concept of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy between the mid-1990s and the present, and it also remains consistent with educational theory from years prior including but not limited to Information Processing, David Ausubel's Learning Theory and Alfred Bandura's Social Learning Theory. This area of development in the field is currently expanding and will seemingly continue to expand as professionals in the field of education continue to recognize the importance of meeting student needs within the classroom.

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