

by Kate R. Fitzpatrick

Cultural Diversity and the Formation of Identity

Our Role as Music Teachers

Abstract: This article encourages music teachers to consider the complexity of their students' cultural identities and the role these identities play in the formation of students' self-concept. The musical heritage students bring to the classroom may provide a rich foundation of experience for teaching and learning music. Readers are challenged to consider their own cultural backgrounds and experiences for possible preconceptions that may affect the classroom. Culturally relevant pedagogy is discussed as a way to improve the connection between school music curricula and student cultural identity, with specific suggestions and resources provided for the refinement of both curricular content and teaching.

Keywords: cross-cultural competency, cultural identity, curriculum, deficit model, pedagogy, self-concept

In my fourth year of teaching high school band in a large urban high school with a predominantly African American population, I was feeling satisfied with my progress as a teacher, knowing that I had worked hard to learn about my students and make my classroom a comfortable place in which students of all cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, and races could learn and make music. However, when I was discussing the compositions of Edward "Duke" Ellington during band class one day, one of my top students, a young African American, raised his hand and asked, "Were there really black composers?" I remember feeling crushed, wondering how, despite my best intentions, I had neglected to help my students understand and appreciate the immense

accomplishments of African American musicians. I also wondered if my own background as a white teacher had caused me to take for granted that most composers we studied were white, while for my students, the issue of race was an obvious and constant consideration.

As demonstrated in this vignette from my own early years of teaching public school, issues of cultural identity manifest themselves in important ways in the classroom. When we consider issues of social justice in the music classroom, we often look to empower students to address and solve problems that exist throughout the broader school or community. However, we must not neglect

Knowing about your students' cultural backgrounds—as well as recognizing your own—can foster greater respect, clearer understanding, and better connections in the music classroom.

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to provide for social justice in our own music classrooms and with our own students. Empowering students to recognize that their own cultural identities are valid, acknowledged, and respected in our classroom is the first step toward nurturing social justice in our schools and communities.

Student Identity and Cultural Diversity

As students begin the process of formal schooling, they begin to form opinions concerning their abilities, due in large part to how well they can assimilate culturally into the school environment. The

cultural messages that students receive in school settings can greatly affect their subsequent achievement. In the words of language professor Sonia Nieto, "student performance is based on both overt and covert messages from teachers about students' worth, intelligence, and capability."¹ In many music classrooms, students come from a variety of cultures and circumstances, and differ in terms of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, exceptionality, and sexual orientation.² All of these differences affect the ability of children to make connections between their personal identity and the school music curriculum.

The identity development of students of differing cultural backgrounds can be markedly different, and research can help us understand how our students' identities are formed.³ For example, researcher William Cross has studied the development of racial identity in African Americans. He has written that the self-concept of African American students depends heavily on their reference group orientation, or how well they feel that their own personal identity as an African American aligns with the norms and expectations of the culture that surrounds them.⁴ How does this apply to the music classroom? When a student sees, for instance, that the music that he or she enjoys and values at home or with friends is ignored or degraded by institutions, such as schools, it creates cultural conflict. By authentically aligning our music curriculum with the music that our students value, we can find better ways to connect more effectively with their personal identities. When this happens, our students' perception of conflict is lessened, resulting in an improved self-concept. Cross's model not only provides an explanation of the challenges that African American students may face when navigating cultural boundaries, but can also be understood as helping us understand the needs of students from various cultural backgrounds.

What can we do as teachers to lessen the identity conflicts that our students might experience between the classroom and home? There are several important

conditions that we can help promote within the boundaries of our classrooms and schools. For example, the following have been found to be important factors in reducing student racial and cultural identity conflicts and encouraging academic success:

1. Positive peer relationships with others of the same cultural group.
2. Knowledge about the notable achievements of members of the same cultural group.
3. The availability of role models.
4. The encouragement of significant adults.⁵

How can we better foster such conditions within our music classrooms? First, we can pay more attention to the social interactions of our students and develop projects that allow for positive peer interactions to develop, paying special attention to the cultural background of our students when grouping them for projects and assignments. We can also include within our curriculum pieces composed, performed, and arranged by musicians who reflect the cultural background of our students, and we can discuss the contributions that these individuals have made to music history and contemporary society. As music teachers who often share profound musical experiences with our students, we often do serve as role models. However, if we do not share the racial, ethnic, or cultural background of our students, we might also wish to bring into our classrooms artists, musicians, and guests who reflect our students' cultural identities to serve as role models. Finally, as teachers who frequently play significant roles in the lives of our students, we can be proactive in recognizing the unique potential of each individual, regardless of cultural background. Students may excel in different ways in our classrooms than they do elsewhere in the school or the community.

Teacher Identity and the Deficit Model

As music teachers, we bring to the classroom a rich and multifaceted culture of

our own, and we may unknowingly and incorrectly assume that the needs of our students are the same as ours when we were students. Despite our best intentions, there are times when we might not provide the cultural validation, acknowledgment, or curricular connections that our students need. As with the previously given example of my own teaching experience, we may have a different cultural background from our students in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionality, or sexual orientation, and this may cause us to be ignorant of our students' needs for cultural connection. The music teacher's understanding of how to best facilitate learning in a way that is culturally sensitive may be affected by his or her prior life experiences with poverty and diversity, learned attitudes and preconceptions about the learners with which he or she interacts, and the teacher education that he or she received.

It is important to be thoughtful about how our own backgrounds might affect our expectations of our students and our interactions with them. Research shows us that teachers who come from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds than their students often consider their own behaviors to be "normal," while they interpret the behaviors of their students as being "deficient" or "abnormal."⁶ This set of assumptions is often termed the "deficit model" of urban or multicultural education. Music education professor Cathy Benedict observed that

The commonness of Whiteness in our society spawns a culture in which the experiences of the White teacher become the normative yardstick by which to measure all experience. . . . Music educators often "expect" students to behave in certain ways, to come from certain kinds of home environments, and to lack the specific experiences that will prepare them for "our" music education agenda.⁷

As teachers, how can we combat this deficit model in our own classrooms?

Research shows that teachers who differ from their students in terms of racial and ethnic background can nonetheless share values and assumptions that help them better relate to their students.⁸ Consider, for example, the case of a Latina music teacher who teaches African American students. Although this teacher may find it difficult at times to relate to her students, she might make a conscious effort to look for areas of commonality. For example, perhaps the teacher could recognize that both she and her students tend to come from large, strong, extended families in which multiple generations are involved in the raising of children. Perhaps she might also recognize that many of her students also have a strong sense of faith and attend services at a house of worship regularly and have a strong sense of pride in their cultural heritage. In noticing that many of her students hold after-school jobs that help support their families, she might recall her own experiences as a working student. By thinking critically about the multiple cultures that her students inhabit and striving consciously to find points of commonality with her own experience, this teacher may be able to better relate to, empathize, and understand her students. Once we as teachers understand where our students are coming from, we are in a better position to think critically about the assumptions that we might unconsciously make due to racial and ethnic differences.

Our Role as Music Teachers

As we acknowledge that our students hold various and multiple cultural identities, and as we explore and become more attuned to our own cultural background, what can we do to make our music classrooms more culturally supportive? Research shows that many students are becoming increasingly alienated from traditional means of schooling, experiencing a disconnect between their home lives and their school environments.⁹ Culturally relevant pedagogy

is often cited as a way that teachers might increase student investment in and comprehension of school curricula.¹⁰ This approach embraces the establishment of natural ties between in-school work and out-of-school experiences as a means of decreasing the disconnect that many students feel between these two worlds.¹¹ Culturally relevant teaching is defined as

a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically, by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural references are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right.¹²

In the field of music education, where creativity and personal expression are valued, it is especially important to address the disconnect that students may perceive between home and school cultures.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: For All or for a Few?

If we define culture as “the ideations, symbols, behaviors, values, and beliefs that are shared by a human group,”¹³ we can recognize that all students are members of multiple cultural groups. Although we often discuss issues of culturally relevant pedagogy when discussing urban schools or schools that serve students who belong to nondominant racial or ethnic groups, all students are better served by teaching that takes into account who they are and what they have experienced. All teachers need to be concerned with the alignment of the music curriculum and student cultural identity by focusing increased attention to culturally relevant pedagogy—both content and process.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: The Content

One way that music teachers can better connect in-school and out-of-school

experiences is by focusing on the content of our curriculum. For music teachers, the process of including culturally relevant music within the content of our curriculum must begin with an inquiry into the multiple cultures that students might represent, as a student’s cultural identity and heritage may not be readily apparent and indeed may differ quite significantly from his or her obvious skin color and physical characteristics. Learning more about students’ cultural backgrounds could take place in many ways across general music, band, choir, and orchestra settings, as students are encouraged to “tell their own story” of the multiple cultures that they represent.

Once teachers better understand the multiple cultures represented by their students, they can be creative about the ways that they include culturally relevant music within the classroom. For example, professor Kathy Robinson discusses the ways that three general music teachers found ways to celebrate each student’s culture and to create positive relationships with students, families, and communities.¹⁴ One of these teachers, Leanne, teaches in an inner-city school whose recent immigrant population composes 80 percent of students. She makes a great effort to include the music of her students’ cultures within the classroom by making trips to students’ homes to experience such cultural life as songs and dances. Indeed, Leanne even invites parents into the school to perform these traditional dances and songs. According to Leanne,

My dream is to finally get such a repertoire that no matter what country somebody comes from, we have something that would go—You’re from this country and on their first day in class you take out the video and you play it for them and they are like—“Oh, there’s a piece of home that I get right here, and maybe this place isn’t so horrible,” because we deal with the culture shock thing so drastically.¹⁵

Music education professor Herbert Marshall examined music programs

in three different-size urban school districts—Jackson, Michigan; Hartford, Connecticut; and Atlanta, Georgia—and found that these successful programs each had different characteristics leading to their success.¹⁶ In one of his case study schools, Marshall notes the great popularity of the electronic music class, where students are taught sampling, sequencing, and composition using technology. Most students compose hip-hop pieces but have also learned to incorporate the styles of other genres, such as classical, folk, and jazz. Marshall notes that this class seemed to be “the highlight of many students’ day.”¹⁷

Teachers can also help make explicit connections between schoolwork and students’ lives by exploring the musical cultures and traditions of the local communities that surround the school. Indeed, music education professor Victor Bobetsky describes the successful implementation of a choir director’s effort to increase student understanding of the African American culture within a Brooklyn community.¹⁸ In this project, a choir director in Brooklyn partnered with other teachers in the school to study the history, heritage, and culture of their local community through music, visual arts, and language arts, with a final culminating project presented to both school and community members. This type of investigation, which asks students to think a great deal about the rich musical culture that surrounds their everyday experiences, implicitly values students’ musical traditions.

The use of culturally relevant materials within music classes may increase student motivation to succeed, as found by music teacher Dianna Isaac-Johnson.¹⁹ Isaac-Johnson developed a curriculum for a hip-hop opera in which students watched musical performances, learned songs with the use of a karaoke machine, and created new lyrics for these songs using facts from history and science classes. Because the instruction included hip-hop, Isaac-Johnson’s students were better motivated and more eager to participate.



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Although traditional music programs may well serve the needs of students from multiple cultural backgrounds, the development of additional alternative performance ensembles may also be of value. Groups such as nontraditional percussion groups, rock ensembles, technology-based ensembles, and mariachi ensembles may better resonate with the cultural background of many students who might not otherwise enroll in our traditional music classes and performance ensembles.²⁰

The inclusion of multicultural and culturally relevant music in the curriculum needs not replace the study and performance of traditional Western art music. In the world outside the music classroom, multiple musical genres and

styles coexist; this can also be so inside the classroom.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: The Process

Including pieces that represent different cultural traditions in the repertoire of our performance ensembles or general music classes does not, in and of itself, constitute culturally relevant teaching. Our students might or might not enjoy the experience and gain insight into some aspects of certain musical cultures. Multicultural content in and of itself does not necessarily lead to increased cultural competency or to forging a better alignment between home and school life for our students. It is the

questions we raise and the “teachable moments” we seize, no matter what music we choose, that can provide space for students to be thoughtful about issues of cultural connection. We must concentrate on the interactions, discussions, questions, dialogue, and explicit and tacit foci of our pedagogy in an attempt to guide students to greater cultural awareness and acceptance.²¹ It is through these interactions with students that they learn the most about our expectations of them and our intentions in fostering their growth as members of multiple cultural communities.

For example, while teaching in the school mentioned in the opening vignette, I combed the archives of my instrumental music library and found a very old score of arranged African

Readings on Cultural Diversity, Multicultural Content, and Culturally Relevant Teaching

- Carlos Abril. "Breaking the Language Barrier in Music Instruction." *Music Educators Journal* 89, no. 5 (2003): 38–43.
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- Gloria Ladson-Billings. *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.
- Sonia Nieto. *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, 4th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2004.
- Patricia Shehan Campbell. *Teaching Music Globally*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Terese Volk. *Music, Education, and Multiculturalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

American spirituals to sight-read with my high school orchestra. Opening the score, I read in the "notes to the conductor" some antiquated and offensive terminology relating to the African American experience. It was a busy day at the end of the year, and we had much to do, so I wondered whether we should just go ahead and play the piece or whether I should read the passage to my students and open the potentially charged topic for discussion. I chose the latter, and we as a class spent the entire period in an intense discussion of the evolution of racial terminology, the use of certain terms in modern rap songs, and even the use of such terms in our school hallways. I moderated the debate to ensure that all students could have their voices heard. I offered a few probing questions but otherwise let the students debate among themselves. Although we lost almost a full rehearsal

that day, my students gained an opportunity to share their opinions as well as the knowledge that their music classroom was a place where difficult and complex discussions of issues such as race were welcome.

Culturally relevant pedagogy asks us as teachers to recognize that it is our primary role to foster an atmosphere where students are encouraged to speak openly, ask questions, and conduct respectful dialogue with each another and with us about relevant issues. To raise these issues alongside the integration of popular, world, or community musics, teachers must be thoughtful about the ways in which they structure their lessons. As education professor and high school English teacher Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and professor of urban schooling Ernest Morrell state, it is extremely important that students are first provided with a "cultural frame" through which they

can understand the subject matter being studied.²² Such a frame provides context for the genre or piece they are learning and encourages a critical examination of the origins of the music, the social structures surrounding musical phenomena, and relevant issues of social justice.

Including popular music in the music classroom opens up opportunities for the examination of popular culture and how it affects students' lives. Hip-hop provides a very specific example, as many scholars have noted the contradictory nature of hip-hop culture: on one hand, hip-hop has created an Afrocentric focus within the music community that has spurred such social positives as voter registration drives. On the other hand, hip-hop music and music videos often portray violence and the denigration of women.²³ As with the previous story, the music teacher has the power to create spaces in the classroom where such issues can be raised. When time for thorough discussion of such issues is limited, students can be asked to journal their thoughts about such issues, or even to contribute to a teacher-moderated and password-protected class blog to allow reflection and interaction.

Our pedagogy is reflected, then, not only in our choices for culturally relevant curricular content but also in the ways that we handle questions, concerns, and dialogue. In this way, even our most informal interactions with students—hallway discussions, end-of-class questions, or mumbled asides—become important parts of our curriculum. Focused on empowering our students, we become cognizant of the many messages that we are sending them with regard to their own cultural identity and the extent to which we embrace different perspectives and viewpoints in our classroom. Our pedagogy becomes culturally relevant when we focus on allowing for meaningful dialogues and interactions to emerge from our music-making.

Moving Forward

From an early age, our students adapt to the expectations and messages that

they receive from teachers and schools. As teachers, we have the option either to acknowledge and celebrate the richness of cultural experiences that our students bring to the classroom or to ignore it. The literature on identity development stresses the need for the inclusion of culturally relevant materials and discourse in the classroom as a means of connecting with and validating student identity. Embracing the cultures of our students successfully in the music classroom requires attention to both the content of our curriculum and the process of our pedagogy. Without such actions, we as teachers may unintentionally propagate dissonance between students' personal and school identification. A culturally relevant pedagogy of music instruction asks that the cultures of our students be acknowledged in our classrooms. Through careful and critical consideration of the rich cultural backgrounds that both we and our students bring to the learning experience, and through thoughtful planning for the incorporation of culturally relevant music and pedagogy in our curricula, music teachers and their programs can more effectively serve the needs of their deserving students.

NOTES

1. Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, 4th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2004), 43.
2. *Exceptionality* refers to cognitive, physical, social, or behavioral conditions that mean that the students possessing these conditions may receive support or other consideration in the classroom.
3. Charles Negy, Tara L. Shreve, Bernard J. Benson, and Nizam Uddin, "Ethnic Identity, Self-Esteem, and Ethnocentrism: A Study of Social Identity versus Multicultural Theory of Development," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 9, no. 4 (2004): 333–34.
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5. Beverly D. Tatum, "Family Life and School Experience: Factors in the Racial Identity Development of Black Youth in White Communities," *Journal of Social Issues* 60, no. 1 (2004): 117–35.
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8. Kim Kennedy White, "Exploring Relationships between Lived Experiences of Teachers Who Are Culturally Competent and Their Success with Diverse Students" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Colorado at Denver, 2006).
9. Dianne W. Hayes, "Educating the Hip-Hop Generation: Communication Barriers Offset Efforts to Reach Young Minds," *Black Issues in Higher Education* 10, no. 14 (1993): 30–33; and E. D. Washington, "A Componential Theory of Culture and Its Implications for African-American Identity," *Equity and Excellence* 24, no. 2 (1989): 24–30.
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11. Hayes, "Educating the Hip-Hop Generation"; and Washington, "A Componential Theory."
12. Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*, 17–18.
13. James Banks and Cherry Banks, eds., *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1993), 357.
14. Kathy Robinson, "White Teacher, Students of Color: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy for Elementary General Music in Communities of Color," in *Teaching Music in the Urban Classroom*, vol. 1, ed. Carol Frierson-Campbell (Lanham, MD: MENC/Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2006), 35–56.
15. *Ibid.*, 41.
16. Herbert Marshall, "Restructuring and Partnering in Urban Schools: Change, Cooperation, and Courage," in *Teaching Music in the Urban Classroom*, vol. 2, ed. C. Frierson-Campbell (Lanham, MD: MENC/Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2006), 161–78.
17. *Ibid.*, 174.
18. Victor V. Bobetsky, "Exploring a Community's Heritage through a Collaborative Unit of Study," *Music Educators Journal* 91, no. 5 (2005): 51–56.
19. Dianna Isaac-Johnson, "Creating Culturally Relevant Technological Operas in an Urban School" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri–Columbia, 2007).
20. René Boyer-White, "Reflecting Cultural Diversity in the Music Classroom," *Music Educators Journal* 75, no. 4 (1988): 50–54; and Kevin Mixon, "Building Your Instrumental Music Program in an Urban School," *Music Educators Journal* 91, no. 3 (2005): 15–23.
21. Delpit, *Other People's Children*; Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*; and Nieto, *Affirming Diversity*.
22. Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell, *Using Hip-Hop Culture as a Bridge to Canonical Poetry Texts in an Urban Secondary English Class* (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA, April 24–28, 2000).
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