Multicultural Music And Learning

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Abstract: This study presents an overview of multicultural music, and how learning multicultural music can aid student’s in discovering his or her personal identity along with enhancing a student’s social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Historical knowledge highlights why multicultural education and music tailor to the majority culture, yet pedagogical practices are included to fortify teachers’ confidence and effectiveness so that they can teach multicultural music as a valuable instructional tool. Using Critical Race Theory, this research demonstrates how students can use their array of senses in learning to overcome the prejudices that often are associated with learning multicultural music. New theoretical ideas are introduced, but these theoretical ideas are broad. Limitations include some broad teaching and learning practices, but more concrete examples would strengthen the effectiveness of these teaching and learning practices.
Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is “the coexistence of diverse cultures, where culture includes racial, religious, or cultural groups, and is manifested in customary behaviors, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative styles” (Chu, 2005, p.1). It illuminates power struggles among different races and ethnicities of people and identifies racial codes weaving in and out of music education pedagogy. Although it is designed to educate and possibly curtail forms of racism through understanding other cultural patterns, values, and communication techniques, multicultural teaching has not and will not ever totally eliminate any and all forms of racism (Bradley, 2006). However, multiculturalism is imminent in the music of many different cultures, and learning the music of diverse cultures is a pertinent and useful way to educate and expose children to a wide array of cultural norms, ideas, and other skills (Pellegrini, 2010).

Importance Of Multicultural Music

Children naturally have an interest in music. From this innate appreciation, the joy of music can be spread around the world. Music conveys ideas and cultural norms, and other skills such as learning languages, learning dances, and understanding people are cultivated through learning different types of music (Pellegrini, 2010). Children can potentially expand their mathematical skills as they experiment and digest multicultural music from around the world. Multicultural music can enhance the moods of children, escalate their acceptance of other children, promote harmony and inclusion among children from different cultures, and most importantly, strengthen their listening skills (Rattigan, 2014).

From a creative angle, learning multicultural music empowers and educates students to develop their own music while fostering their understanding of people in other cultures. Understanding one’s own culture as well as other cultures enables a person to establish an identity. Thus, the purpose of this research is to investigate the importance of multicultural music in the learning process of students. Teaching and learning multicultural music can aid students in developing their personal identities, their sensory skills, as well as their social, emotional, and importantly, their critical thinking skills (Elliott, 2014).

Multicultural Education

Multicultural education is a term incorporated in educational curriculums. The idea behind this concept is that all races and ethnicities of students are given equal access “to learn in schools” (Banks, 2009, p. 1). Living in a global economy, students need to be essentially attuned to the complexity of cultures outside their immediate environment. Within the field of music education, various races, cultural norms, and ethnic traditions are ingrained and, consequently, expressed in music education. In essence, there is a social role of music in human life, and music teacher educators should be encouraged to learn and adopt music from an array of different ethnic backgrounds, not only for social benefits but also for academic skill enhancement (Campbell, 2004; Piaget, 1983).

However, many music educators are reluctant to include multicultural music in their lesson plans. Their hesitancy derives from their lack of desire, the challenge of learning and teaching multicultural music, and the challenge of pinpointing the culture from where the music originates (Campbell, 2004). To counter this problem, many music teachers have collaborated with expert musicians to gain knowledge as a means to understand cultural diversity and guide their students in learning this diversity from musical themes (Campbell & Schippers, 2005). Coincidentally, teacher educators even have difficulty teaching European music to students, for students often are vague in their understanding of European cultural history (Abril, 2006). This is only one example of a social as well as cognitive difficulty that arises from learning multicultural music.

European Music

Historically, European music has been deemed superior in all forms and fashions, especially when compared to folk music of native peoples (Bradley, 2006). Based on European conquests, European music has triumphed over other cultural songs, melodies, and hymns. This notion of superiority is correlated with economic, military, and moral superiority that European rulers have permeated throughout the world, giving them the right to control and direct all other native peoples (Said, 1993). At the root of European superiority lies the concept of colonialism (Meiners, 2001).
European colonialism often distorts or devalues, overtly or covertly, other native music as a symbol of superiority (Meiners, 2001). Colonialism is defined as, "the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically" (Sadie, 2014, p. 4). Economically, one foundation of colonialism is racism (Bradley, 2006). In order to understand the underlying themes of European music, researchers have to examine the embedded racial tones. Deeply ingrained in multiple layers of colonial practice, these racial tones have to be decolonized, the process of analyzing racial knowledge rooted in colonial culture and norms (Smith, 1999). However, in cultures such as Canada, multicultural practices and music may actually conceal racial tones, such as Canada portraying its non-racist mentality to its citizens (Bradley, 2006). As a result, racism is concealed; thus, students are not confronted with racial themes embedded in music that they listen too, impeding their social, emotional, and cognitive development of multiracial and/or pluralistic society (Smith, 1999; Bradley, 2006).

So, in order to decolonize, racial categories and codes need to be deciphered in music. In essence, racial tones need to be clarified and modified as they denigrate non-European or native countries’ musical practices and seek to uphold or elevate European music (Small, 1998; Bradley, 2006). Racial injustice and inequity remain in music education as multicultural music intentionally or unintentionally fails to realize the racist connotations, evident in European or even native music (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Therefore, teachers and educators need to identify and dismantle any and all racial, ethnic, or cultural themes, reflected in music. In addition, these same educators and teachers need to examine their own personal biases, which can infiltrate their interpretations of racial tones evident in multicultural music (hooks, 1994).

Multicultural Music

In order to teach multicultural music, instructors need to initially overcome their fears associated with teaching the subject matter. Some teachers are apprehensive, for they fear that teaching multicultural music may present some themes or ideas, which can offend students of multiracial backgrounds. In essence, teachers fear that their students will misinterpret their knowledge and/or styles of teaching multicultural music as a reflection of them being racist (Campbell, 2002). Ironically, however, music educators and students need to recognize the full scope of racism globally in order to take steps to reverse the practices associated with racist pedagogy (Beck, 2002). As embedded in multicultural music education, educators can identify racial words and meanings and subsequently create new musical lyrics and songs that are antiracist, inclusive, and maybe even multicultural. In turn, the composure of antiracist music can highlight the significance of these struggles occurring in the world currently (Bradley, 2006). In addition, bell hooks (1994) comments on how anti-racist multicultural music can perpetuate a wave of empathy and care for those of different ethnicities.

Other advantages of learning multicultural music enable people to have a better understanding of their own cultural norms as well as themselves (Jorgensen, 2010). Multicultural music enables people to personally grow and develop socially: they develop an understanding cross-culturally, and in essence, they learn not only their own cultural norms, but they also learn the practices, obligations, and responsibilities of other cultures (Warren, 1970; Agawu, 2003). For example, the background of the song "Mandela" opens students’ minds to learning new elements and has an appreciation for black African communities (Miller, 1989; Oehrle, 1991; Bebey, 1975; Agawu, 2003). Another author reports that further understandings of cross cultural music have instilled a culture of tolerance among students in the country of Australia (Joseph, 2011).

Teacher Education Programs

Teacher educators are responsible for ensuring that their programs incorporate various forms of musical expression as students learn to respect and tolerate varieties of opinions and approaches concerning cultural diversity in music education (Anderson & Campbell, 1989). As mentioned above and as a first step, student teachers have to recognize how their beliefs and values influence their teacher-student interactions (Allen & Porter, 2002). A second step is for music teachers to get to know their students along with their students’ cultural norms. Subsequently, music educators must see that music
education within a context is vital for students to learn multicultural themes of music as the context enhances both cognitive and affective learning. Music within a context can be expanded by encouraging teachers to attend cultural centers where they can expose themselves as well as their students to varieties of cultural music. In addition, teacher educators can be creative by incorporating their music lessons into plays or concerts along with encouraging their students to create dances where cultural norms can be expressed through dancing as students learn multicultural music. As a result, students can understand cultural differences as it is reflected in the music. In turn, teachers and students not only realize cultural differences, but they also can build relationships with students from other cultures as they interact and learn from one another (Chu, 2005). Overall, a culture of inclusivity is hopefully fostered (Joseph & Southcott, 2005).

Other pedagogical practices that teacher educators can use include drum circles. Drum circles entail organizing students where they circle around drums. Students play their beats, socialize with other drummers, and attempt to learn from one another. Through socialization, students learn the drum beats of other classmates, and they attempt to keep their concentration as they play their drum beats. However, other drum beats are interfering with each student’s concentration, so students have to learn to listen and concentrate more intensely (Blacking, 1983; Joseph & Southcott, 2005). Coupled with drum playing, students can tell stories about the beats along with cultural songs which are enriched through storytelling. Students can share themes of the stories explaining why songs are sung (Tyler, 2009). For example, certain African songs relay the importance of tribal children becoming obedient to their parents along with other tunes that arouse debates concerning the social positions of African tribal women (Joseph & Southcott, 2005).

Multiculturally, teachers and students gain an appreciation of not only other cultures such as African, but also a greater understanding and appreciation for their own culture, especially if they live in a first world country or country with wealth. African songs, in particular, convey knowledge about the use of cultural resources such as cattle. In addition, respect for elders in countries such as Africa is reinforced through teaching African music along with other cultural norms such as rites of passage into a tribe. Moreover, teachers and students realize the basic necessities that they are granted in their home country while other cultures such as in Africa are in dire need of these basic necessities (Joseph & Southcott, 2005).

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

As a theoretical perspective, Critical Race Theory (CRT) discusses the inequities among people based on their racial characteristics (Ladson-Billings, 2006). CRT articulates that racism is ordinary in day to day life. Following this tenet, CRT racial characteristics define races of white color ascending races of other color. Furthermore, since people defined as “white” are in the majority, the majority race outnumber the minority “other” races, thereby, eliminating the need for most people to identity and curtail most racial inequality. Finally, even legislation that has attempted to curtail forms of racial discrimination such as Brown versus The Board of Education may actually have benefitted elite white people as opposed to helping African Americans (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006).

Other theoretical tenets such as “social construction” clarify how humans construct racism from social interactions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006, p. 3). Humans magnify physical racial traits such as skin color and hair texture, yet in reality these traits have little in common with advanced internal characteristics such as intelligence, personality, and/or moral actions. Coupled with these social constructions, majority white races often manipulate how they value minority races such as African Americans, Mexicans, and Japanese. For instance, the media often sends contradictory images of different racial minorities. Throughout history, it is not uncommon to see African Americans being displayed as happy servants of white plantation owners, yet in other movies, they are viewed as violent and brutish, portraying a race that needs close super-vision and subjugation. Overall, these racial themes described in CRT have resulted in countless acts of racial intolerance and racial injustice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006).

As a consequence of CRT, teacher educators and students are able to reflect on empirical support, which justifies how the majority culture favors European music at the exclusion of music from minority races
(Bradley, 2006). More importantly, this research, as reported above, illuminates the positive aspects of multicultural music as it generates inquisitiveness, collaboration, and appreciation for historical themes and cultural norms of minority races (Joseph & Southcott, 2005). In addition, an added theme is for teacher education programs, teachers, and students to realize the cognitive skills that multicultural music can add to educational curriculums. For example, research conveys that students learn more effectively and efficiently when they incorporate more of their senses within the learning process (Janet White, personal communication, November 8, 2005). Teachers and students, for instance, work with other mixtures of white and African American students, collaborating with one another. They learn African American pronunciations of songs, thereby, enabling white European students to enhance their verbal and cognitive schemas. In addition, teachers and students learn dances to African songs, utilizing their auditory and kinesthetic skills, to enhance their cognitive memories of not only African music but also the cultural themes that accompany these songs and dances (Joseph, 2012; Piaget, 1983). Specifically, other students who have learned African songs and dances report the benefits of these experiences, advocating that learning through collaborating with other African pupils is far more efficient and effective than learning from a class with a book (Joseph, 2012).

Socially, students learn cooperation and celebrate African music as a way to value cultural diversity. Students commence to want to learn other students’ cultures, and they can assimilate and/or accommodate their existing schemas regarding another race; these schemas have been organized over years from their environmental upbringing (Piaget, 1983; Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Other advantages include an appreciation of one’s own racial identity and pride. Overall, students and teachers learn to respect other cultures, simulate a sense of togetherness, and create micro steps that assist in building a nation such as in South Africa (Joseph, 2012). These positive aspects culminate from advancing students and teachers’ cognitive schemas (Piaget, 1983).

### Learning Styles

According to Sheehan-Campbell (1991), “teachers have traditionally directed their students in learning small amounts of material by listening, reflecting, and then performing” (p.156). Particularly, auditory learning of small amounts of information is valuable for certain ethnic songs such as African or Indian music; learning by ear develops and reinforces neural traces, utilized in storing information in long-term memory and increasing a listener’s attention span. As previously mentioned, effective learning of multicultural music is enhanced when it is situated in parts of a student’s community such as in his/her home (Senders & Davidson, 2000). In addition, research demonstrates that multicultural music is learned through various channels such as playing, singing, repeating the names of musical notes, and creating detailed representations of melodies within one’s memory. Overall, these various channels are tapping into a person’s array of senses where learning is most effective when it is perceived, encoded, transmitted, and interpreted using one’s senses: audition, kinesthetic, vision, olfaction, and gustation (Siegler, 1996).

Students learn multicultural music using their auditory sense, regarded as the most routine way of learning. Novel, unpredictable sounds are termed gestures. In multicultural music, there are many original sounds that radiate from the human tongue, human hands, and/or other parts of the human body. These sounds are distinct and represent gestures as they differentiate themselves from other sounds. On the other hand, whistling noises, snapping of fingers, and even some hand claps are often heard and become predictable or undifferentiated. These sounds are labeled textures. Learning other cultural songs improves students’ language skills; it helps students decipher and learn new sounds, increases concentration, and expands students’ thinking capacities (Senders & Davidson, 2000).

The kinesthetic sense can be combined with the auditory sense. Participants stand in a relatively tight circle, chant different syllables in conjunction with specific footsteps, and alternate singing sounds on different feet. Children who learn other cultural dances develop their kinesthetic abilities and acquire skills. The rhythmic patterns create a unified pulse just as new musical instruments can weave their sounds into
the musical rhythm, creating distinct multicultural styles of music, such as music that is heard in Ethiopia. Finally, learning cultural dances may improve children’s social and emotional intelligence (Senders & Davidson, 2000).

In turn, auditory senses can be strengthened not only with kinesthetic moves but also with visual cues. Clapping of hands coupled with repeating sounds or counting numbers out loud can be altered using symbols such as letters or numbers being written on chalk boards. Students can even use pointing instruments to track rhythmic flows that are written on chalkboards as a way to strengthen neural traces that are formed among multicultural music learners (Pellegrini, 2010).

Finally, similar tastes and smells that are associated with clapping, drum playing, and seeing numbers/letters on chalkboards can enhance music memory. In essence, taste and smell are highly correlated. Therefore, learning multicultural music can be catalyzed by encouraging students to learn sounds with the same tastes in their mouths coupled with complementary smells in order to encode and process learning of rhythms, melodies, etc. (Siegler, 1996).

**Limitations/Future Research**

This research highlights specific areas of multicultural music and benefits that accompany the application of studying multicultural music. Multicultural music also has many pedagogical benefits as well as cultural ones. However, limitations include a very broad range of teaching benefits with few specific concrete examples. In addition, the theoretical base is broad, yet the introduction of new theoretical ideas is presented and briefly explained. Future research needs to use more specific examples from the literature to demonstrate practical applications of theories along with concrete examples of how learning styles have been effective with multicultural music. Future research also needs to illustrate what specific teacher education programs have benefitted from learning multicultural music and expand on the benefits received for both teachers and students in school districts.

**References**


