

Philosophy of Music Education

Eric Williamson

Teachers College, Columbia University

Music plays an essential role in our society by voicing our values, hopes, interest, and cultures. When the music curriculum reflects the child it is serving, it has the power to make life changing connections in the classroom environment and the school community. Music is a reflection of our humanity.

I began teaching as a traditional choral educator who had knowledge of several different methodologies: Kodaly, Orff, and Gordon to name a few. I had much success leading a choral ensemble by integrating these different teaching approaches, but I could never make authentic connections with children who looked like me. The repertoire also reflected Western aesthetics and classical approaches. Often the black and brown students in these environments were bored, checked-out, and not fully engaged. I began to question the effectiveness of these approaches for non-white students. As I began to teach in more non-white spaces, I began to ask the students what their interest were, their family backgrounds, current musical interest, and ethnic heritage. Their responses encouraged me to rethink my teaching approach. How can I make a lasting musical impact with my students? How can I teach musical literacy using their musical preferences? How can I validate their artistry? How can I expand their musical knowledge without silencing their cultural identity?

These questions guided my evolution into a culturally responsive educator. The interests of the students framed the skill development. Repertoire should reflect the cultural identity of the students, school community, and the neighborhood. Centralizing the interest of the students encourages the student to take ownership of the artistic process, it validates their voice in the classroom space, and it provides a safe space for inquiry. Responsiveness leads to community building and engagement. Since I have integrated cultural responsiveness into my teaching, I

have had less behavioral problems in my classroom and more engagement from students and families alike. School communities and classrooms can sometimes be oppressive spaces for black and brown children. They are often marginalized, labeled, and stereotyped as the “bad” children who are commonly policed for behavior. Music education has the power to change this narrative. Through critical engagement and reflective practices these students have the opportunity to learn how to use their voice and advocate for themselves.

Through music education, my students are able to harness the power of their voice and understand its impact in the world. Through the development of musical skills, they are able to cultivate an artistic voice and an appreciation of cultures from across the globe. They experience how to sing in different languages, the social impact of music, and how to actively participate in their own musical communities. Often music educators are tone deaf to the rich musical cultures already present in neighborhoods and school communities in New York City. This connection enhances the musical connections made in the classroom and will further encourage hands-on community engagement outside of the classroom. As an active performer, my musicianship has increased tenfold as I have engaged in this work. Exploring non-western musical genres has empowered me to be a holistic musician and artist. My students teach me something new everyday.

I am continually learning from my students. There is a cyclical and reciprocal power dynamic at play that is inclusive. This makes room from an open-ended curriculum that is led by the students, modified by myself, and shared with the community at large. My skills are continually refined, challenged, tested, and strengthened through this process. My previous teaching process was method driven and teacher directed. My current teaching practice is student driven and method integrated; the later is more reflective of the needs of the students.