Implications of Diversity Issues for Music Education

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Implications of Diversity Issues for School Music Teaching

Introduction

Due to the diversity of the modern classroom in America, and the importance of cultural awareness, there are many factors that today’s music teacher needs to take into consideration to be effective. Race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geography all have certain implications for the music educator. I have chosen to examine articles regarding these factors, and ways in which a music educator in any setting can be more effective within a diverse setting. This topic is of interest to me because I am originally from an area that lacks any kind of diversity as outlined above. The area I grew up in is rural, and consists of mostly middle-class Caucasian families. I have had some very positive experiences working with diverse youth and I would like to learn more about how to teach them more effectively. The purpose of this paper is to explore ways to teach more effectively in diverse music classrooms.

Albert, 2006

Albert reviews the findings of several research projects investigating the influence of socioeconomic status (SES) on instrumental music students. In particular, Albert discusses SES as it relates to student recruitment, retention, participation in instrumental music, attitude toward music, and school support for instrumental music. After describing several key findings from various sources, Albert gives some research-based recommendations for how to prevent SES from affecting an instrumental music program in a negative way.

Albert discusses student recruitment, retention, and participation, as investigated in the projects of six different researchers. In all of these studies, low SES was shown to have a negative impact on student recruitment, retention, and participation. In one of these studies, SES was even found to have more impact on retention than both academic competency, and musical
aptitude. In another it was found that students of more educated parents (and therefore higher SES) were more likely to participate in the Swedish Municipal Music School. Another researcher suggests that low SES can negatively affect participation and the overall quality of an instrumental music program, and the inverse is true for high SES areas.

Albert also discusses findings in SES research related to student attitude towards music. Findings by Philips support that SES can negatively influence student attitude toward music, since the home environment is not conducive to participation. However all other research reviewed by Albert suggests that SES and student attitude toward music are not correlated. Two additional studies on student attitude towards music suggest that SES can have an effect on a school’s perceived attitude towards music (as demonstrated by availability of programs, funding, treatment of music students, etc), and therefore student participation.

Albert concludes with suggestions for implementing an instrumental music program in a way that the impact of low SES can be mitigated. The author recommends that school districts should lend instruments to qualifying families of low SES so that instrument costs will not prevent students from participation. Albert also suggests an “instrument roundup-night,” (p. 43) in which community members can make tax-deductible donations of instruments for students to use. In his concluding statements the author stresses that while teachers do not have control over their students’ SES, they should seek all possible ways to reduce the negative effects of low SES.

Abril (2003)

Abril begins this article by noting the rise of the Hispanic population in America. Several statistics follow the brief introduction, which provide a background for the problems surrounding the education of this growing demographic in America. Foremost among the educational
concerns surrounding the Hispanic population is the fact that they are the largest English Language Learner (ELL) group in America. The language barrier is most likely to blame for the large achievement gap between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students. The high school dropout rates for Hispanics is four times that of white students, and double that of African-American students. After highlighting the challenges of teaching Hispanics in America, the article identifies common measures taken by schools to accommodate this part of the population, as well as describe ways music teachers can effectively teach Hispanic students despite cultural and language barriers.

Abril describes four common models of English as a Second Language (ESL), or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). This is in order to explain the way in which the language problem with ELL students is addressed by most schools. Although many other models exist, most schools use a derivation of one of the following. The first is the bi-lingual model in which some classes are taught to the student exclusively in their home language, some in English and their home language, and a class in which English alone is taught as a subject. The second common method described is the structured immersion model, where all subjects are taught in English. In such a class setting the teacher speaks both English and the home language fluently but only responds to students or instructs in English. The author noted that this is usually only available in schools with large ELL populations. The third model is two-way immersion, where all students’ (ELL and English speaking) education is integrated between foreign language instruction and core areas. The fourth model described in the article is submersion, in which ELL students are mainstreamed into English speaking classes with little or no extra instruction.

The effects of ELL instruction is not felt so negatively in elementary schools, as far as participation is concerned, since most learners are mainstreamed into music class at this level.
However it is important to consider the needs of ELL students in the music classroom. Sensitivity to their cultural differences can help make instructional and curricular decisions. In secondary schools however, where music is often an elective, ELL students generally do not get an opportunity to participate in music programs since they are more often required to take language classes instead. The author recommends seeking creative options in recruiting ELL students to participate in school music, and strongly recommends the MENC publication *Music and Students at Risk: Creative Solutions for a National Dilemma*, as a useful resource for this.

Some tips are then given for working with ELL students. First and foremost, having a sincere respect and desire to help ELL students is mentioned. If students are ostracized or singled out, they will have negative impressions of school and will ultimately lose interest, resulting in poor achievement or dropout. It is recommended that from the very first class ELL students are made to feel welcomed, and to never force them to engage in activities that make them speak English. Instead, provide a non-verbal activity to keep ELL students involved such as keeping the beat on a drum, or playing an Orff instrument. Personal interaction and rapport is also mentioned as being key to reaching ELL students. Try to talk to students before or after class, with or without a translator, and try to learn more about them so they really feel at home in music class. What the teacher learns in discussion with the students can help guide them to developing meaningful instruction. This goes along with the author’s suggestion of integrating the student’s cultural heritage into lessons. Teachers are warned against having lower expectations for ELL students, since research shows that this can lead to minimal effort and low achievement.

Several teaching techniques are provided for helping develop English language proficiency among ELL students in the music classroom. Assigning hand signals with certain English words and using them consistently is given as an effective way to visually reinforce
meaning of certain words or musical concepts to students. Abril gives the example of having students draw an arch from left to right with their hand to mean a “musical phrase,” (p. 42) or, having palm up for a Forte dynamic or palm down for a Piano dynamic. Using Orff speech ensembles with both Spanish and English is given as an idea for both English and ELL students to practice a new language in a musical context. Songs with repetitive words, non-sense words or neutral syllables, and songs in languages other than English are also recommended.

McCrary (2000)

This article presents findings from research involving students’ reactions to various kinds of music in the classroom, and comparing how students of different races and genders react to the music. Some conclusions of earlier researchers are first discussed, followed by an explanation of the research the author conducted, and then the findings of the author’s own research are given.

Several factors were found to have significant impact on listening preferences. The first is maturation. Students mature over time, and their musical tastes and reactions to music of various cultures change. Race proved to be a significant factor in students preference of certain pop artists, according to one study cited. In another study, racial identity was shown to influence African-American middle-school students’ preference for African-American musicians versus European musicians. A later study by the same researchers showed that the racial makeup of the class influenced student reactions to different music as well. For example, in a mixed race classroom African-American students had a more positive reaction to African music than in a classroom where they were the minority. Another study mentioned showed that students in
Elementary school have a preference to play with the majority group of the classroom, as opposed to the minority group.

Having established that maturation, and race play a significant role in students’ reaction to music, the author describes the research they conducted. In the experiment 118 students in grade levels three, five, and seven, of mixed races and genders, were selected to complete a musical listening survey. One piece by an African-American rhythm and blues artist was played, one by a Latin-American salsa singer, and one by a European-American Folk singer. The students were instructed to rate the selections, which were all 4 phrases in length, based on like or dislike on a scale of one to seven. After this initial activity students were broken into small groups (four or five students) to listen again to the three excerpts and decide what the singer’s age is. Their interactions were then observed.

It was found that on the survey, African-American students at all grade levels tended to give their highest ratings to the African American singer. The European-American students’ rating of the Latin-American singer decreased as grade level increased, and in all three grade levels they rated the African-American singer lower than the European-American singer. In the subsequent small group activity, majority group students were more likely to initiate or contribute to group discussions. Conversely, minority group students were less likely to initiate or contribute to group discussions. Classroom minority group female students were less likely to participate than their male counterparts. In some of the classrooms the majority was African-American, and in some classes the majority was European-American. So the findings are cross-cultural.
Summary

The articles reviewed above have taught me several important considerations for teaching in diverse music settings. One thing I find important is the need for the teacher to be creative, and open-minded in finding ways to transcend the difficulties of teaching students of diverse backgrounds (Albert, 2006; Abril, 2003). Abril touches on the idea that it is often easier to accommodate ELL students in schools where they are more common, since the best alternatives for teaching ELL students are not always available to schools where not as many students require them. This is a new idea to me because I have always assumed that it is harder to be an ELL student where there are many of them since they do not receive as much individual attention. But the schools with more ELL students can more readily justify having extensive bi-lingual programs, as opposed to just having an aid come in once or twice a week for an hour or two. This demonstrates the necessity in education to shed what you know or assume, and approach issues with a fresh mind.

The findings Abril and McCrary contained some good learning points for me. The most important thing I take from them is that race, and sex has profound influence on students’ interaction with others, their musical learning, and their musical preferences. (Abril, 2003; McCrary, 2006) In particular, female minority students may be inhibited from interacting in class because of their status. (McCrary, 2006) Given Albert’s finding that SES was a more significant determining factor, and McCrary’s finding about female minority students, this implies that recruitment and retention of female minority students or low SES females may be even more difficult than of their male counterparts.

All three articles provide some helpful ideas on how to deal with the implications of diversity that have been researched above (SES, ELL students, effects of racial identity). The
prevalent suggestion with regard to all these areas is to always exercise utmost concern for the students’ individual needs, and seek creative alternatives to what is easier, or more common, so that no students fall behind. (Abril, 2003; Albert, 2006; McCrary, 2006) Albert mentions some good ideas for dealing with low SES students. For example, the school providing instruments at little or no cost to qualifying families, or having an “instrument roundup night,” (p.43) where community members donate instruments that can be lent to students that cannot afford them. Abril provides some good general pointers that I had never thought about before when teaching ELL students in the music classroom. Don’t pick activities that could make an ELL student feel singled out, especially ones that force them to speak English if they’re not comfortable with it yet. (Abril, 2003) Use songs with repetitive words, sometimes songs in their native language or that reference their culture, and try to keep ELL students active so their musical experience is a positive one. (Abril, 2003)

Conclusions

This paper has helped me explore ways to be more effective in diverse classroom settings. For example, I’ve learned ways to encourage ELL student participation. I described the area I went to school in as lacking cultural diversity. I have always felt that it is not polite to pay special attention to some students because they are different, and have thought that it would be unfair to others. This is because where I am from there are few minority students, especially ELL students. But the research I have seen by Abril helped me to understand that developing a special bond with an ELL student (or any student with a special consideration; low SES or low self-esteem, etc) can really help keep them involved and feeling positive about music class, and that is crucial for their achievement. There are other ways I can increase my success with students of
other races, ethnicities, and languages than my own. If I have a student or students from various ethnic or cultural backgrounds, I can take it upon myself to learn about their culture so that I can incorporate it into planned instruction. (Abril, 2003; Kelly, 2004) This will help make their musical experiences meaningful, and engaging. A positive music experience at an early stage could help students troubled by language barriers, low SES, or both want to continue music into secondary school, or simply motivate them to stick with school. That’s important with minorities in particular, since their drop-out rates are higher than that of the general population. (Abril, 2003)

I learned that the minority group, regardless of what race that is, tends to be less active in group activities. (McCrary, 2006) When I teach in diverse settings, I will have to remember this and plan my lessons in ways that encourage equal participation from all members. I also learned that when students listen to music from cultures or ethnic groups they can often be un-receptive, and even disrespectful. (McCrary, 2006) Disrespect for musical performers is unacceptable, even if they are not physically present. If students are exposed to a variety of musical cultures and styles from an early age, the probability of this is less likely. That is something that an entire music department within a school district would have to work on, throughout the entire curriculum.

Low SES is something that exists in all schools, even ones in more affluent areas. In fact, it is probably more difficult to be a student in an affluent school district from a low SES background, since you they are the minority. So regardless of where one teaches, this is a diversity factor all teachers will have to deal with. The formation, or support of a music booster club, as recommended by Albert, could help offer support to families that cannot afford music activities. This could include money to subsidize or pay the costs of instrument rental, private
lessons, school music trips, or anything else that lower income families cannot afford. The findings of several researchers show that a family’s low SES can have a significantly negative impact on recruiting of instrumental students. (Albert, 2006; Philips, 2003; Niemen & Veak, 1997)

In settings with great socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity, the implications of diversity issues are often viewed as hurdles. Having a student that does not speak English, or whose family is poor, is often seen as an undesirable thing. After all, nobody wants a child to have to overcome such difficulties growing up. But the individual differences of students is what makes them special, and indeed each and every one of them deserves to experience music. So it is the music teacher’s job to reach out to individuals with these problems, and do whatever it takes to provide a meaningful and accessible music experience to all students.
References

