

Affirmation and Representation in the Music Classroom



By Jacqueline C. Henninger and Andrea Sanchez

Many events throughout our past year continue to impact the lives of our students in marginalized populations. When individuals are repeatedly exposed to images that represent them in negative settings, that exposure can have a negative effect on their identities. As music educators, aware of the intended and unintended messages students receive about themselves during these turbulent times, we must make concerted efforts to affirm our students' identities and provide them with positive models that represent them.

In the "Declaration on Equity in Music for City Students," a call to action derived from the 2017 Yale Symposium on Music in Schools, a plethora of information is shared regarding the teaching and learning of music in urban classrooms. One of the many recommendations put forth in this declaration addresses the training of music educators who teach children of diverse ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. For music educators to effectively provide students opportunities for emulation and aspiration, educators must structure learning experiences so their students' identities are affirmed and represented in the music learning setting.

In this article we will offer key points of consideration regarding the concepts of *affirmation* and *representation*, including research into their importance, and we will share steps you can take to ensure they are effectively incorporated into your teaching.

Affirmation

In her book *Can We Talk about Race? And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation*, author Beverly Tatum explains that *affirmation* refers to the act of acknowledging our students' identities by providing opportunities for them to feel "seen, heard, and understood." According to Tatum, taking the time to affirm our students' identities is an effective way to create an inclusive classroom. One of the best ways to affirm your students' identities is to learn about them as individuals and the lives they lead. Tatum goes on to say, "It's not about being nice (to our students) it is about

being knowledgeable about who our students are and reflecting a story that resonates with their best hope for themselves."

One of the ways in which music educators can accomplish this is with culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy. In Geneva Gay's *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, she explains that culturally responsive teaching is when an educator uses "cultural knowledge . . . and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them." Similarly, culturally relevant pedagogy connects students' "in-school work with their out-of-school experiences" (from *Urban Music Education: A Practical Guide for Teachers* by Kate Fitzpatrick-Harnish). Using these types of pedagogical approaches, music educators can build positive relationships with their students.

Other ways in which music teachers can actively work toward affirming their students' identities include the following:

- Take time to learn how to properly pronounce your students' names. This enables your students to see that you value every aspect of their identity and appreciate the diversity they may bring into your classroom (Batesky, 2017).
- Use inclusive language. Utilize language that does not diminish or exclude the different groups of students that you teach. By doing so, you demonstrate your willingness to affirm the different identities, experiences, abilities, and perspectives that your students have.
- Select repertoire or listening examples of various cultures and composers. This is an effective way to implement culturally relevant pedagogy. By integrating students' cultures into your curriculum, you are connecting their personal, educational, and musical worlds in a way that can be extremely affirming.
- Remove the "I am color-blind" or "I don't see race" mentality. Although most people who choose to use these phrases have good intentions, these phrases often don't function positively

for people of color. This disconnect between intention and function may occur because the person of color may feel as though they are not seen or valued when they are on the receiving end of such a statement.

Representation

Similarly to affirmation, representation is an important element of consideration when teaching in ethnically diverse settings. Representation refers to the act of providing students with opportunities to be exposed to and to engage with images and individuals who bear some sort of resemblance to the students themselves. By providing students with opportunities to engage with like-models (e.g., gender, ethnicity), we set the stage for them to emulate and aspire to be something even greater than they may have ever envisioned for themselves (Declaration on Equity in Music for City Students, pp. 53-54). This can be accomplished by providing a variety of program offerings, such as jazz band, mariachi, conjunto, West African drumming ensemble, or other world music ensembles. Offering students opportunities to engage in ensembles such as these can function as a wonderful supplement to typical ensembles while also enabling opportunities for identity affirmation and representation through an ensemble representative of a specific culture.

Another way music educators can provide representation in their music classrooms is by programming literature that is reflective of diverse populations. An excellent source for locating works composed by members of marginalized populations is the Composer Diversity Database (www.composerdiversity.com). This database allows users to enter a variety of criteria to search for

literature that is representative of different populations and genres (e.g., ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation).

Additional ways music teachers can actively work toward representing their students include the following:

- Research your repertoire selection. Taking the time to examine and learn about the cultural and historical contexts of literature will benefit you and your students. Make sure the repertoire you choose to program accurately reflects your values and beliefs, and be willing to engage in conversations with your students about the piece, its composer, and any other contextual information that is of significance to the piece. This is another opportunity when one should consider intent versus impact. You may intend for the piece to serve a particular purpose, but its impact on your students and the community in which your school is located might differ from that original intent (Urbach, 2019).
- Display visual images that are representative of members of marginalized populations. Representation really does matter. Showcasing visual images that enable children to see like-models who have achieved different forms of greatness will positively contribute to your students' identity development processes.
- Share aural and video clips of high-quality performances that are representative of members of marginalized populations. When we expose students to excellent performances by musicians who represent diverse populations, those students gain meaningful models to emulate and the motivation to aspire to greatness.

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- Include music of diverse cultures in your curriculum. While highlighting diverse cultures during specific appreciation months is essential, work to include these types of lessons into your standard curriculum throughout each year.
- Invite clinicians of diverse backgrounds to work with your ensembles. Giving students the opportunity to work with like-models firsthand is a valuable experience.

Recommendations for Continued Learning and Growth

As we continue to learn more about one another and improve the ways in which we engage with each other, there are some steps we can take to positively affect this learning and growth process:

- Take the time to engage in conversations with people of different cultural identities. This will enable you to expand your sphere of influence (Tatum, 2007).
- Actively search for literature that discusses the topics of cultural consciousness and inclusive instruction. This will provide you with information that will positively affect the ways in which you engage with diverse students and communities.
- Keep the following Swahili proverb in mind: “Kidogo, kidogo, hujaza kibaba.” The English translation for this proverb is “Little by little, we fill the cup.” Recognize that for every small modification made in your music teaching and learning approaches, a positive outcome will be experienced by your students and the communities represented within your school.
- Listen more, reflect often, empathize willingly, and act with the impact of your words and deeds in mind.

Why It Matters

Affirmation and representation have long been important points of consideration for music educators. Unfortunately, only some music educators were actually taking the steps to affirm their students’ identities and incorporate aspects of representation. However, as the demographics of our society continue to shift, music educators have an even greater responsi-

bility to effectively meet the needs of the diverse learners who they are given the opportunity to teach. It has been projected that by 2040 our country will be majority-minority, which means the collective majority of our society will represent individuals who were once considered minorities in it. This demographic change within our nation is already beginning to be reflected in the demographics of our students.

We owe it to each of our students to provide them with music learning experiences and opportunities that affirm their identities and positively contribute to their music and identity development. ■

Jacqueline C. Henninger is Associate Director for Performance, Education, and Applied Studies and an Associate Professor of Music Education at Texas Tech University, School of Music. Andrea Sanchez is Assistant Director of Bands at Alvin HS in Alvin ISD.

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