



# CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

WHAT IT IS, AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT IN MUSIC EDUCATION

BY CONSTANCE L. MCKOY

**A** fundamental premise of teaching is that students are unique in the ways that they learn. It is one of the reasons that incorporating a variety of teaching strategies and approaches is a fairly common practice among teachers. Additionally, our increasingly pluralistic and interconnected world underscores the influence of cultural factors on student learning.

We've come a long way over the past two decades in recognizing the importance of cultural diversity in music education. Leading music education scholars often cite the changing demographics in American schools as the catalyst for new approaches to music teaching, and we have seen tremendous growth in the professional literature dealing specifically with cultural diversity and music learning. The idea of multicultural music education, which has focused primarily on broadening the content of music instruction to encompass the music of a variety of world cultures, is not new to music educators. However, another facet of teaching and learning—culturally responsive pedagogy—has only recently come to the attention of the music education community.

According to educator and researcher Geneva Gay, culturally responsive teaching “uses the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (2010, p. 31). Culturally responsive teaching involves affirming diverse cultural characteristics, perspectives, and experiences and using them to form bridges to new learning and ideas.

Through a culturally responsive approach to music teaching, music educators can make significant and meaningful learning connections with students. There are four guiding principles that can help music educators put culturally responsive teaching into

action in their classrooms and rehearsal spaces:

1. Learn about yourself.
2. Learn about your students.
3. Create a supportive classroom environment.
4. Make curricular and program decisions that are responsive to culture.

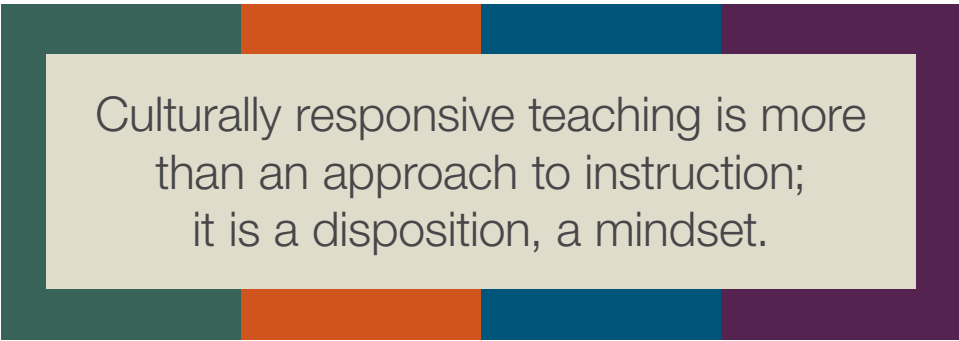
## Learning About Ourselves

Parker Palmer said, “We teach who we are,” meaning that our approaches to teaching and learning are influenced as much by our own personal experiences, attitudes, and world views as by our music and education courses. Given that there is more ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity among K–12 students than among the teachers who instruct them, it's not surprising to discover that many teachers view cultural difference from a deficit perspective. That is, because some teachers may be biased in favor of mainstream ways of learning and instruction, they view students who follow mainstream classroom practices as being highly motivated and more highly achieving than students exhibiting ways of behaving and learning that are culturally different.

To overcome the effect of bias in the classroom, teachers must recognize their own assumptions by engaging in critical self-reflection and self-assessment. Before we can deal with cultural bias in the classroom, we must recognize it in ourselves and acknowledge that our actions reflect both our conscious and our subconscious beliefs.

## Learning About Our Students

As music teachers, most of us would agree that getting to know



Culturally responsive teaching is more than an approach to instruction; it is a disposition, a mindset.

our students is a key component to effective teaching. In the context of culturally responsive teaching, getting to know our students means not only learning about their academic capacities but also acknowledging the culturally situated musical knowledge they bring to the classroom. Sometimes we approach our students as if their minds are a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, as if they don't really know anything about music until we inscribe information on their brains. When we take the time to find out what our students already know and can do musically, we can use that information to craft more meaningful learning experiences for them. Getting to know our students also means understanding that the way they learn best may be influenced by culture. Just as we recognize the importance of understanding learning processes from a cognitive and behavioral standpoint, we should also consider how cultural factors impact the learning process.

Here are a few strategies to help you know your students in a culturally responsive way.

- Get to know how your students engage with music outside of school. Attend musical performances that aren't necessarily related to school. You can learn a lot about different aspects of your students' musicianship when you can see them perform other genres of music. You can also use their understanding and performance of music outside of school to form bridges to understanding music learned within the music classroom.
- Get to know how your students spend leisure time outside of the music classroom.
- Attend sporting events and other activities in which your students are involved to view your students in new ways.

- If you don't live in the same neighborhood as the students you teach and there are faculty and staff members in the school who do, talk with them about their neighborhood experiences. Seek out their community members and talk to them as well.

### Creating a Supportive Classroom Environment

Creating a supportive environment that is conducive to learning is critical to culturally responsive teaching, and teachers wanting to do so must first demonstrate that they care for their students while simultaneously having high expectations for their academic success.

Culturally responsive caring goes beyond just the feelings we have toward our students; it is connected to action. Teachers must be concerned about the whole child and take responsibility for nurturing both academic success and psychological well-being. Music educators are in a unique position to demonstrate cultural caring with students because we often teach the same students over the course of several years. This not only allows music teachers to develop deeper relationships with their students, but it may also help teachers develop culturally affirming perspectives.

Consider the following strategies designed to welcome and value diversity:

- Critically evaluate the visual materials in your classroom (e.g., posters, pictures in textbooks, videos). Do they depict people of diverse backgrounds and abilities engaging with music (e.g., conducting, composing, performing, critiquing, teaching)?
- Video-record a series of lessons from different vantage points in your classroom. As you watch the videos, critically analyze your teaching. Do you focus on certain students or certain

groups of students? Do you use vernacular phrases, humor, or sarcasm in a way that could be misunderstood? What does your body language say to the students? How do your students look and sound as they enter the room and exit the room?

- Think carefully about how your interactions with your students reflect your attitudes about cultural difference. Is your teaching biased in favor of mainstream ways of knowing and learning? Do you have difficulty valuing the diversity represented among your students? Do you see cultural difference as an instructional problem needing to be solved rather than a characteristic that can be valuable in teaching and learning?

### Making Program and Curricular Choices That Are Culturally Responsive

By the time many students reach high school, a large percentage of them are not involved in a school music program (Elpus, 2013, 2014; Elpus & Abril, 2011). Culturally responsive teaching calls for a curriculum that reflects the interests and goals of all students, and in the case of music, this means not only exposing students to unfamiliar music but also finding ways to connect to the music our students prefer and practice outside of the classroom.


Being culturally responsive also includes thinking about structuring our instructional delivery in ways that enhance student learning in music. For instance, learning to read music notation is viewed as an important goal in music education. However, once we begin to introduce notation to our students, we inadvertently initiate a slow transition of emphasis from the ear to the eye, and as students move through our programs, we may give less credence to the benefits of aural learning.

Many of our students who engage in music outside of school are learning it through an aural tradition. Regrettably, students whose ways of learning music and whose musical skills stem from an aurally based instructional model often find themselves at odds with formal instruction in music, and they can feel that they have no place in school music programs.

Some of the strategies that follow can assist teachers in acknowledging ethnic

and cultural diversity in the music classroom:

- Expose yourself to music that is outside your area of expertise. Listen critically for ways the music compares to what you are working on in class or in your ensembles.
- Capitalize on the musical expertise in your community and invite “culture bearers” into your classroom. Often you can find resources in your own school building by emailing the staff and faculty, asking for musicians in a specific genre or who perform on certain instruments. Contacting your students’ family members or visiting local music stores and community centers can also lead to valuable community connections.
- Be aware of how the language used in discussing music can sometimes be value laden. The terms that we use to describe/evaluate sound, such as *ugly/beautiful*, *in tune/out of tune*, or even *musical*, can sometimes reflect conscious or subconscious aesthetic biases. Using other terms such as *serious music* or referencing some music as *extra* or *additional* to a core music curriculum can be perceived as exclusive.

Culturally responsive teaching is more than an approach to instruction; it is a disposition, a mindset. You can start by committing to one of the guiding principles in this article. My hope is that as you see the benefits of incorporating a culturally responsive approach to your teaching, the more you will appreciate how it can positively transform music learning for your students. 



Constance L. McKoy is Marion Stedman Covington Distinguished Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the School of Music at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is also a 2022 TMEA College Division Featured Clinician.

*This article is reprinted with permission from the Massachusetts Music Educators Journal, spring 2018 edition. Portions of this article are excerpted from Culturally Responsive Teaching in Music Education:*

*From Understanding to Application (Routledge, 2016) by Vicki R. Lind and Constance L. McKoy.*

### References

- Elpus, K. (2013). Is it the music or is it selection bias? A nationwide analysis of music and non-music students’ SAT scores. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 61, 175–194.
- Elpus, K. (2014). Evaluating the effect of No Child Left Behind on U.S. music course

enrollments. *Journal of Research in Music Education*. 62, 215–233.

- Elpus, K., & Abril, C. (2011). High school music ensemble students in the United States: A demographic profile. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 59, 128–145.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

## It's at [www.tmea.org](http://www.tmea.org)

*Our website offers access to TMEA programs, important organization business, teaching resources, advocacy materials, and much more. Go to [www.tmea.org](http://www.tmea.org) and explore what's available.*

### TEACHING RESOURCES

- Music TEKS you are required to teach.
- Answers to questions from teachers like you (as seen on page 12).
- Online resources repository, tips for new teachers, and much more.

### MUSIC EDUCATION IN THE LAW

Learn how Texas law supports music education for every student and get updates on state-level actions that affect your work.

### ADVOCACY MATERIALS

Download print and video resources to distribute at concerts and meetings. Professionally produced advocacy videos are available and include versions with Spanish subtitles that may be downloaded.

### DIVISIONS

Each division has its own section on the website for program information and updates (audition entry and results, workshops, etc.).

### TMEA PROGRAMS

From the Job Services section (which you might have visited to find a job) to the Mentoring Network, Scholarships, and much more, you can learn about our programs and apply online.

### MUSIC INDUSTRY PARTNERS

TMEA wouldn't be able to offer the current level of support to teachers without our music industry partners. Find contact information on our exhibitors and licensed vendors online.



#### Can't Find It?

*Use the search function when you can't find what you're looking for, and you'll get a list of relevant webpages on our site.*