

# Co-Constructing a Culturally Responsive Music Program

## **Co-Constructing a Culturally Responsive Music Program**

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## **Introduction**

Located in upstate New York, Johnson City Central School District is experiencing a cultural shift whereby a once predominantly white student and faculty population has transformed into a school community with increased racial and ethnic diversity. In spite of this diversity within the stakeholders, the music curriculum, like most traditional school music programs, continues to favor white western European musical traditions. And while many students of color participate early on in school music ensembles, a disproportionate number of these students choose to leave the school music program prior to graduation. Matthew Clauhs, the coordinator of the music program at Johnson City School District partnered with Radio Cremata and Baruch Whitehead of Ithaca College to apply for a NYSSMA-sponsored action research grant for the 2014-2015 school year to examine why students choose to participate, or not participate, in school music in the Johnson City School District, through the lens of a culturally responsive pedagogy framework.

## **Theoretical Framework**

There is a vast amount of extent research on culturally responsive pedagogy in the field of education that could be helpful when designing culturally responsive music programs. Ana Maria Villegas and Tamara Lucas (2002) describe how a culturally teacher (a) is socio-culturally conscious, that is, recognizes that there are multiple ways of perceiving reality and that these ways are influenced by one's location in the social order; (b) has affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, seeing resources for learning in all students rather than viewing differences as problems to be overcome; (c)

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sees himself or herself as both responsible for and capable of bringing about educational change that will make schools more responsive to all students; (d) understands how learners construct knowledge and is capable of promoting learners' knowledge construction; (e) knows about the lives of his or her students; and (f) uses his or her knowledge about students' lives to design instruction that builds on what they already know while stretching them beyond the familiar. The authors utilized this culturally responsive framework when designing the research questions, purpose, and method for this study.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to examine the reasons why students from diverse backgrounds decide to participate, or not participate, in school music electives and ensembles from 4<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and determine strategies towards developing a more inclusive, culturally responsive music program at this school district. Three main questions guided this research: (a) How is student participation in school music informed by cultural beliefs; (b) What kinds of classes, ensembles, and instruments would all students like to see offered at their school; and (c) Do all students, and particularly those not participating in music programs, see themselves and their culture represented in the music program?

## **Method**

### **Setting and Participants**

Johnson City High School is situated within the greater metropolitan region of

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Binghamton, in upstate New York. According to the National Center for Education Statistics for the 2013-2014 school year, it is a midsize suburban Title I school, with an enrollment of 759 students grades 9-12. 69% of students are white, and 63% are eligible for free or reduced lunch. While the school district has faced challenging economic decline in recent years, the community and administration continue to support a strong school music program. In the 2014-2015 school year, the district was recognized as a Grammy Signature School Finalist, and was one of the NAMM Best Communities for Music Education. The school district hosts a NYSSMA Solo Festival each year and regularly participates in All-County and All-State music festivals as well as NYSSMA Major Organization Festivals.

Participants ( $n = 15$ ) for this study represent a wide variety of gender, racial, and ethnic categories. Eleven of the participants participated in one or more school music ensembles, while four of the participants participated in none. Figure 1 below presents the participants along with their self-reported race and ethnicities, genders, and their school music experiences. All names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants.

<b><u>Name</u></b>	<b><u>Race/Ethnicity</u></b>	<b><u>Gender</u></b>	<b><u>School Music Experience</u></b>
Jenny	White	Female	Chorus, Orchestra
Maria	Hispanic	Female	Chorus, Band, Orchestra
Erica	Black	Female	Chorus, Band
Peter	White	Male	Orchestra, Band
Samantha	White	Female	Chorus, Orchestra
Katie	White	Female	Chorus
Daniel	Black	Male	Chorus
Brianna	Black	Female	Band
Emma	White-Hispanic	Female	Orchestra, Band
Richard	Black	Male	Chorus
Carla	Black	Female	Chorus, Band
Jonathon	White	Male	None
Caleb	Other	Male	None

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Stevan	Other	Male	None
Cassandra	Black	Female	None

### **Data Collection**

We recruited students for a focus group session by posting flyers around the high school, talking individually with students during lunch periods, and advertising the session on the school announcements. We offered pizza and beverages to all participants and the chance to win gift cards, raffled at the completion of the focus group session. Incentives were partly funded by the NYSSMA Action Research grant, and in part through contributions of local retailers. At the focus group session, we introduced the team of researchers to the students, explained the research study, and discussed the overarching research questions with twenty-seven participants. After the focus group, we compared notes and generated themes that emerged from our conversations with the students. We created an interview guide that would explore these themes more deeply through one on one semi-structured interviews.

Fifteen students volunteered to participate in these interviews following the focus group session. Interviews were conducted at the students' convenience, often after school or during study halls. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and distributed to the research team for coding.

### **Findings**

As the researchers reviewed interview transcripts, two main themes seemed to emerge from the data that addressed all three of our research questions. A number of students reported cultural isolation and a fear or hatred of school music as being primary

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factors influencing student participation in school music. The styles of music and choices of repertoire did not often coincide with the participant's cultural identity and a few students also offered suggestions for classes and ensembles that may reach a greater variety of students. Quotes from several of our participants reflected these overall themes and are shared in the following sections.

### **Cultural Isolation**

Brianna, a black female in band, observed how students of color dropped out of school music ensembles at a higher rate than white students.

And with band it's like when you, when you get to fourth grade, it's like everyone, it's like a melting pot, but then as you start to get older, it becomes more white kids. I'm the only black girl, black person in the flute section, Amanda is the only black person in the clarinet section, and then saxes... okay there's some black people there.

Brianna's observation about the "melting pot" of students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade band, which over time becomes "more white," reflects national trends. She also notes how certain instruments seem to have greater attrition of students of color (flute and clarinet) than other instruments (saxophone). A decline in participation among students of color is not unique to band, and Maria, a White Hispanic student, observed a similar experience of cultural isolation in the orchestra.

In the orchestra I feel like it's more like Asian and white, I mean like growing up here I feel like I'm really... the only Hispanic who really actually is ever there.

This theme of cultural isolation is also true of chorus. Erica shared marginalized experiences being "the only black girl in the chamber choir" and the assumptions her classmates made about her.

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So we got... Elijah's Rock, and I was all excited because it sounded really cool. It was for the chamber choir and I was the only black girl in the chamber choir at all, and it was really funny because everyone just turned around and expected, and like asked me so, 'How are we supposed to sing this?' And I kind of couldn't really say anything because I never really grew around gospel music, I like hip hop and then pop music, so I didn't really do anything in like a gospel church or anything, so I didn't really know either, so I was just as lost as they were.

The selection of "Elijah's Rock" demonstrates the chorus director's recognition and respect of African American art forms, which is very important. As we continue to integrate the music of a greater variety of cultures in our ensembles, teachers and students alike must be careful not to assume students will be familiar with, or interested in, styles of music commonly associated with a particular racial category.

### **Fear/Hatred of School Music**

Emma explains how students who don't speak up about their weaknesses may get "steamrolled" by their music teachers.

Well, I've been in the Orchestra since 4th grade but I could not read music until I got to High School. I had no idea, [my teacher] like had a panic attack, it was very scary for all of us... I think it's really important to understand, for the teachers to understand where you're at and to be honest with the teachers because if they don't know you can't read the music, they're just going to steamroll over it.

Brianna believes that little exposure to classical music at a young age influenced her to "hate" certain styles of pieces in band. Especially Sousa . . .

I think black kids, we're not necessarily exposed to classical music as other people and uh so when we get to band and we're playing like marches and like different kinds of things like that it's kind of like offsetting and personally like, I hate Sousa marches like with a passion. I hate them. I hate playing them, I find them detestable in every way.

While Brianna was excited to participate in the concert band - even winning awards and recognitions for her outstanding participation - she clearly expressed hatred

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for the music of John Philip Sousa, and what his music represented in her mind. The music of Sousa, much like many of the works that fill the pages of our NYSSMA Manual, may not be culturally affirming for a young black female.

Other students may not be drawn to large ensembles at all, and Jenny explained how pop/rock ensembles might attract non-music students to ensembles.

I definitely think that more people would be interested in [pop ensembles] because like I feel like with orchestra and band there is kind of like this stigma, 'Oh you know band plays marches, and like orchestra plays classical music,' so its like I feel like people are more likely to kind of stay away from that kind of stuff... If we had that kind of thing with like the guitar, you know, bass and stuff people would be more interested.

However, not all participants expressed a fear or hatred of school music, and one participant reminded us that the traditional school music model already works for so many students, including students of color. Erica, a black female who performed in both the band and chorus, expressed the importance of keeping classical music in the curriculum.

I just hope that in the future, if things do start to change to let a more blended community of music people into the school, I really hope that the classical era is still staying because that's still a really important part of music history and it's really exciting to play.

Erica later graduated high school and is now attending a prestigious school of music. It is worth noting that any elimination of these "classical music" programs might have jeopardized Erica's own trajectory in life-long music making. Her word of caution against removing traditional school music for the curriculum should be taken very seriously, and a balanced approach that seeks to broaden music programs, instead of replacing them, may be the best course of action.

### **Impact on Practice**

This action research project had a profound impact on the course and direction of the district music program. Findings from the research study were shared both informally through conversation and formally through department meetings with the music faculty. All music teachers agreed to participate in professional development activities targeting non-traditional approaches to music teaching and learning before the start of the 2015-2016 school year and many implemented significant changes to their curriculum in an effort to create more inclusive learning environments that meet the needs of all children. Several classes changed their focus from a method-book, traditional White-European model of learning, to a model that engages the ear, creativity, and collaborative music making experiences. Popular music influences became more prevalent in both general music classes and electives, as teachers drew on resources featuring a greater variety of styles and artists, including R&B, hip-hop, rock, and pop genres.

### **Collaboration**

The Johnson City School district formed School/University partnerships with local colleges interested in providing undergraduates with opportunities to teach contemporary music in a student teaching capacity. Ithaca College hosted a Little Kids Rock training in the spring of 2015 and invited music teachers from Johnson City School District to participate. Radio Cremata, of Ithaca College, presented this School/University partnership program between Ithaca College and local schools, including Johnson City at the 2015 Little Kids Rock Rockfest Symposium. Matt Clauhs, of Johnson City, co-

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presented the Ithaca College, Johnson City, and Little Kids Rock partnership at the 2015 Symposium for Music Teacher Education, together with Chad West (Ithaca College) and Bryan Powell (director of Amp Up NYC). Collaboration is an essential element of action research, and this project allowed Johnson City to partner with a variety of experts in the field of popular music education, and connections with programs at Berklee College of Music, Ithaca College, and Little Kids Rock.

Musical collaboration was another result of this action research project and author Baruch Whitehead of Ithaca College brought his spiritual ensemble, The Dorothy Cotton Jubilee Singers, to Johnson City to perform with and for students at the High School. During the performance, Baruch shared the experiences of civil rights leader Dorothy Cotton and messages of racial healing through music.

### **Fundraising efforts**

While an expansion of the traditional school music model was deemed necessary for the survival and growth of the program by local district music teachers, such a project does incur financial costs. The music coordinator developed a timeline of fundraising projects and potential grant opportunities that could help pay for the new equipment and training required for this endeavor. The school district is reaching out to charities such as Little Kids Rock, Mr. Holland's Opus, the Fender Foundation, and Guitar Center for material resources, as well as the National Education Association (NEA) Foundation for assistance with professional development. With the cooperation of these agencies the school district may be able to scale its program to include more offerings and have the

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resources and training necessary to reach their goal of an inclusive and culturally responsive 21<sup>st</sup> century school music program.

### **Recruitment of “non-music” students**

Matt Clauhs, the music coordinator at Johnson City, is working with the school district administration to create new course offerings for the 2016 – 2017 school year. These new offerings would include a number of Modern Band sections, as well as labs that focus specifically on beat-making, piano, guitar, drums, and vocal technique for popular music. The district administration has been extremely supportive of these proposals and looks forward to how they might serve a greater number of students; particularly students who have previously struggled to connect to the school and community.

Once new course offerings and ensembles are established, the music department must find a way to reach out to students who were previously disinterested in school music. The music team and researchers believe the following strategies may be helpful in reaching these students: (a) Create promotional videos to air on morning announcements; (b) create flyers and visual materials to display in hallways; (c) develop highly-visible performance opportunities for the contemporary ensembles; and (d) educate the guidance department about how the new offerings might appeal to these students.

The Johnson City School District, in collaboration with Ithaca College, Little Kids Rock, and Berklee College of Music, hopes to serve as a model for other traditional school music programs, looking to broaden its offerings to create a more inclusive, culturally responsive music program for its students now and in the future. The catalyst

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for this effort was the NYSSMA Action Research grant, awarded for the 2014-2015 school year, and the authors are grateful for the opportunity to explore these questions through action research.

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