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Towards a More Inclusive Music Education

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Diversifying the Styles of Music we
Study, Create and Perform



If we consider that many of the populations we serve today are not the populations our curriculum were designed to serve when they were created, how do we respond?

Change can sometimes be scary. After 19 years of teaching at the same school, this past May, I resigned. It was a once-in-a-lifetime position where I had near complete autonomy; control of the budget, final say in curriculum, was able to bring in multiple guest artists, coordinated tours of the US and abroad, etc. More importantly, we enjoyed creating music together while expanding our own musical tastes and challenging our cultural biases. As great a gig as it was, I felt there was something more I could do. When I handed in my letter of resignation, it was scary, but I was equally excited for the opportunities that lay ahead of me.



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*It's not a matter
of reaching kids
where they are;
it's simply a
matter of
reaching kids.*

After a great deal of thought, I decided to pursue my PhD in Music Education. This was partly due to my desire to learn more about the philosophies, history, and precepts of our profession, as well as to reflect upon and improve my own teaching in an effort to help others through my experiences in the classroom. Since then, I've been lucky enough to visit a number of schools, both in the US and the UK, and discuss with numerous colleagues the pros and cons of our current music education paradigm. As I mentioned in my last blog, I've certainly enjoyed the many robust conversations as we continue to wrestle with the 'how' and 'why' of developing and providing a culturally appropriate, skill-laden, engaging music education.

Two of the over-arching themes I've encountered are 1) there is a growing desire to improve and adapt our profession in a number of areas and 2) tradition and innovation do not have to be mutually exclusive. I would suggest the inclusion of a diversity of musical genres affords us the opportunity to broaden our understanding and appreciation of styles and cultures that might be unfamiliar to us while, at the same time, allows us to connect with our students while modeling a

culturally responsible learning environment. One of the greatest strengths of utilizing popular music in the classroom is not only its relevance to our students in their everyday lives, but that popular music may be among the most powerful discourses available to students as a means by which to construct personal identity and interpret social experience (Campbell & Herbert, 2000).

At the end of my last blog, I wrote, "If our mission is 'encouraging the study and making of music for all,' shouldn't we continue to diversify the styles of music we study, create, and perform?" To go a step further, our NAFME preamble states, "Music allows us to celebrate and preserve our cultural heritages". Did you notice the plural form of heritage? We live in a diverse world with a multitude of experiences, customs, and *heritages*. My lived experience is different from your lived experience. How do we include our student's experiences, musical preferences, and heritages as part of their music education experience, thereby strengthening the relationship between their school and home lives and making it more relevant, relatable and, dare I say, valuable? I would argue one way we can begin to fully realize our mission

statement and preamble is through diversifying the composers and the genres we rehearse and perform in an effort to further engage our students; to allow those who are under-served to see more of themselves in and through the music.

Often, when our time-honored, established methods are questioned or challenged, we tend to take a step back and respond defensively. And it can be a bit scary, too. But if we consider that many of the populations we serve today are not the populations our curriculum were designed to serve when they were created, how do we respond? The majority of 20th century school performance ensembles were based on the popular music styles of the day, at least, up until the 1950's, when band, orchestra, and choir (BOC) became solidified as the traditional instrumentation of music education ensembles.

Gareth Dylan Smith, in his *Music in a Minuet* blog titled Reaching All Students through Music Education, when discussing the reported 80% of students (Edwards, 2006) who go without a musical experience in school, notes:

However, for teachers who wish to reach students beyond the relatively small number involved nationwide in traditional large ensembles in middle and high schools, or for some who may be seeking ways to revive arts programming in a district where funding cuts threaten to kill off music teaching altogether, popular music can provide myriad means to engage students in relevant, creative exploration of vital aspects of contemporary culture (Smith, 2018).

Neither Smith nor I advocate we remove BOC from our offerings but, speaking for myself, I do

encourage our profession to look beyond the status quo, to think outside the box, and to reimagine music education. The core narrative of music education defines who we are, what we do, and how we go about doing it. Sandra Stauffer, when discussing core narratives, writes:

The more stable and powerful the core narrative, the more difficult it is to take in new ideas. The more stable and powerful the core narrative, the more difficult it is to recognize it, re-frame it, and imagine other ways of being (Stauffer, 2016).

How do we change our core narrative from what we *think* music education is currently and adjust our focus to what it *could* be in the future? There have been moments when, as a profession, we've deliberated on the inclusion of a diversity of musical genres, including the MENC sponsored Tanglewood Symposium Project in 1967. There, those assembled agreed that:

...music of all periods, styles, forms, and cultures belongs in the curriculum. The musical repertory should be expanded to involve music of our time in its rich variety, including currently popular teenage music and avantgarde music, American folk music, and the music of other cultures (Choate, 1968).

Indeed, our conference that year was focused the outcomes, findings, and recommendations of the Project.

More recently, the study *Transforming Music Study from its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors*, authored by the College Music Society,

urges a paradigm shift in music education. In their recommendations, the study calls on universities to cast “a strong, critical eye toward the assumptions and practices of the conventional model which, shaped earlier in time, is no longer fully resonant with the opportunities and the needs of students in our time” (Campbell et al., 2014).

How do we foster a blended music education paradigm that takes into consideration the time-honored practices of traditional, jazz, and popular music methodologies and styles? In what ways can we encourage change and adaptation in our current music education structure, to push the boundaries of traditional music education while

respecting the institution, and to employ a multiplicity of musics that will enable us to better connect with our current students, all within the context of nurturing a culturally appropriate, relevant, well-rounded music education? In the same manner a teacher must be mindful of the diversity of learning styles and learning differences in a classroom, engaging our students through a range of genres can only benefit that student, their musical experience and, hopefully, an expanded view of the world we live in.

In the current issue of *Teaching Music* magazine alone there are articles discussing inequity in music education, inclusion and diversity in concert attire, and engaging diversity at our conference.

Session topics at our upcoming conference include a discussion on racial literacy and music education, culturally responsive pedagogy, issues of social justice, and the innovative educational practices of hip-hop, among others. I encourage you challenge yourself and your notions about what music education is and what it *could* be.

Yes, change can sometimes be scary, but a fear of change isn't a defense for being indifferent to the evolving needs of our students. In order to ensure our mission of music for all, it is imperative we explore a diversity of musical styles which will embolden us to better connect with our students in an effort to offer them a transformative music education experience.

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