

Music Education in Inclusive Contexts

Response 3

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The readings from this week provided me with continued opportunities for reflection on a number of concepts on inclusion within music education. I found *Rie's Story, Ryan's Journey: Music in the Life of a Transgender Student* (Nichols, 2013, pp. 262-279) absolutely heart-breaking. The abject failure of the institutional educational system in this context was devastating to Rie's identity as well as to their educational learning. Although music continued to be a bright spot in Rie's life, spaces of mutuality to work things out on a personal level were not created in the music classroom (Allsup, 2016, p.52). Over the past five years I have taught a number of students who were in the middle of discovering their identity as they experienced gender fluidity. It made me query my use of language in the classroom. When dividing students for a folk dance, I have stopped dividing them by binary gender and just used the language of we will be "working in partners" rather than "we will divide ourselves into one row of boys and one row of girls". This has reminded me that how I use my language in the classroom sets a tone for inclusivity or exclusion.

I do find it interesting that although Rie is angry with the educational system as a whole, the church showed incredible empathy and compassion on more than one occasion in this situation. To me this is ironic because as a person of faith, I notice that the church is often criticized for a lack of compassion and empathy as some denominations representing Christian faith are more interested in the legal tenets of their faith than living them out in love, concern and kindness. This gives me a sense of optimism when I see the love and care of a fellow human being override judgemental societal dispositions to Rie. It also motivates me to challenge my unseen attitudes and biases and continue to expand my use inclusionary language and actions in my music classroom.

I admit that when reading Dr. Benedict's chapter "Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief" I found this concept of visiting and discussing religion in the classroom very difficult from a public educational context. But after understanding that we are not trying to proselytize or convert others to a particular religion but rather acknowledge that belief or unbelief is part of a person's individual identity and impacts the lens with which they see the world. "The issue is to come to better understandings of how we come to know the world and to celebrate and honor difference." (Benedict, 2021, p. 137). Whether we agree with each other or not, having these conversations help us understand each other better and acknowledge a world-view that we may not as yet have explored.

As we read articles about decolonizing the classroom, I appreciate Stanton's (2018) statement that "decolonial musicking can break asunder the great walls between theory/practice, scholarship/education, teacher/students/ oppressor/oppressed, and mind/body as we dance, sing, play, and philosophize in the borders together, simultaneously thinking and creating new worlds" (p.10). I think back to when I was a new graduate and I used the skills that I was taught to use in my teacher preparation courses at the university. Although the Kodály method was a strong way to teach outcomes in a Western style of music, I wonder if it hinders the possibilities of radical social change and justice (Bradley, 2012, p.3) "by presenting answers in ways that foreclose dialogue rather than exploring questions" (Bradley, 2012, p.3). I wonder if there are numerous music teaching methods that might be "viewed as a set of answers rather than a process of continually emerging questions" (p. 3). Systemically, the music classroom is a colonized space. Decolonizing it is a massive but important undertaking and begins with reflecting on some difficult questions for me. Do I value some musical traditions and ways of knowing above others? Even though I have indigenous students and understand the reference to indigenous

knowledges, why do I still struggle with the embedded attitude of Indigenous Education being as valuable as western classical music within formal education? Do I value other ways of learning music such as those who are self-taught? This is how deeply embedded the colonialist beliefs are in formal education and in my hidden attitudes. Our reading on this has shined a light on these struggles and although I have improved in recognizing and addressing these attitudes, I have a long way to go. My goal is to honour the diversity of what the students bring of themselves, their musical and personal identity, to the music room regardless of the way they learned music. I will need to scaffold these opportunities so that the students feel safe and know that their perspectives will be valued. I want to decolonize my music classroom, eliminate the oppression of other cultures, and empower non-western musics in an equitable manner within my teaching and learning environment.

I grapple with the ability to offer student experiences using non-western music and the context in which I can accomplish this without engaging in cultural appropriation. When introducing non-western music in my classroom, I generally share the cultural context with the students prior to their participation in the learning of the song. I also include opportunities for students' cultural understandings to be shared when the non-western music is part of their cultural identity as well. But I continue to wonder if that is enough. Our newly proposed Alberta Music Curriculum has a strong connection to Indigenous stories. My understanding of how to bring this into my musical classroom has grown through our readings. In particular, Dr. Benedict states that "Of particular concern are musics from Indigenous cultures, always presented through the relational (often as a gift), and always through story." (2021, p. 130). In order to confront the challenge of cultural appropriation in my music classroom, I am hoping to cultivate relationships with the Indigenous Peoples near Calgary, Alberta so that I can learn more

about their ways of knowing and I would like to invite elders in to share their stories and music with us.

A possible strategy to decolonizing the music classroom is to develop a culturally responsive classroom environment. DeVito asserts the definition of “the term culturally responsive as an educator’s academic partnership with students anchored in commitment, respect, integrity, and honouring diversity.” (2020, p. 3). The concept of cultural relevancy resonated with me as I think of the students that pass through my music classroom and the diversity and cultural agency that they could share with each other if an environment is established where it thrives. It made me wonder if I create this kind of environment in my music classroom. Do I do this on a consistent basis or is it just for specific “projects”? I do offer an open invitation to my students to share something musical with the class and have set up a format so that enough time is allowed so we have enough class time to honour their voice and what they are sharing with the class. But only a few students take me up on this offer. How could I encourage an even greater exchange of shared and diverse musical experiences representing their homes, community, and school? I wish to engage my learners with purposefulness, shared decision-making and a culturally relevant curriculum (DeVito, 2020, p.8). I wish to use this as an impetus for an actionable project in school this coming year.

## References

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