Musical Connections in the Classroom

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"The arts are a powerful connector for a child between the reality of life and academic learning" (DeVito et al., 2020, p. 26). Indeed, they can have a profound impact, but do children actually experience this connection between their lives and learning? Many music educators intend to provide such a connection in their instruction, yet oftentimes children are not able to relate their personal experiences to their learning. What then is required for such a connection to be made? Why should educators strive for this?

A student's ability to connect themselves with their learning depends on how the learning is culturally relevant to them – taking into account many factors including race, gender, socioeconomic, cultural, and religious identity. DeVito et al. argue that culturally responsive education must depend on collaboration between schools and the students' community context. He describes a method that was used at the Rawlings Elementary Center for Fine Arts which aimed to provide such an education. As part of the first step towards cultural relevance, students were asked to bring in music from their environment. Songs from the playground, home life, places of worship, and general entertainment were to become the main source of musical study. In this way, the subject matter was the point of personal connection. As students engaged in learning this music, they were encouraged to formulate and reflect on their cultural identity. This was compounded when they participated in global learning exchanges with other schools around the world.

Even if the repertoire is chosen by the students, not all students are in a position to make connections between their learning and reality. Every student brings their own story into the classroom. Some students boldly live their identity, while others attempt to conceal theirs.

Privilege and power come into play even at a young age as students discover, often through unpleasant experiences, how they fit into their social circle. Dominant and minority groups, described by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) are established. Even before entering the classroom, children already understand that they are different from one another.

Considering the diversity and power imbalances within the student body, music educators need to go beyond curriculum content to facilitate learning connections. Various minority groups are unable to benefit from the instruction of culturally relevant music because they experience discrimination and bullying. Palkki and Caldwell (2018) show the impact that teacher language can have on student perceptions of a safe space. Nichols (2013) echoes this research through a qualitative research study on Rie/Ryan. Despite their love for music, the experience of being bullied prevented them from continuing to enjoy the personal musical connections they previously had. The mere assumption that relevant music will provide a personal connection oversimplifies the complexity of an individual's identity and social context. Educators have a profound responsibility to recognize the interplay of a person's identity, culture, and life experience as they strive to foster classroom environments that are inclusive and safe.

When a safe space is developing, there must be room for dialogue. In her forthcoming book, Benedict (2021) writes that "Tolerance, then, must be learning to exist in dialogue…The kind that extends equality, realizes agency and legitimacy, the kind that has no "winners" (p. 119). Making provisions for dialogue about race, gender, socioeconomics, culture, and religion can create opportunities for students to explore how their identity is connected to musical learning. These moments of dialogue should be welcomed, whether they are planned or unplanned. Moreover, they can enhance the delivery of curriculum and be helpful in maintaining a safe space.

Why then does it matter that students make a personal connection with their learning? Bradley (2012) writes, "For those excluded from school performance groups, for those who struggle to find relevance in school music curricula, and for those unable to hear "their" music in school, music education operates as a colonizing discourse" (p. 6). Because there is an inherent power imbalance between the student and teacher, the repertoire choices we make can imply that some music is a more legitimate form of knowledge than other music. By deeming certain music as inferior and not worthy of learning, we can impose our own values on people whose experience is culturally different from our own. When students are allowed to bring in music from their personal contexts, their voices are heard. Furthermore, they can assume the role of the expert on the music that is learned, possibly equalizing some of the perceived power imbalance. Bradley suggests that when students learn music that is relevant to them, they will be more likely to engage in music making outside of school as well. If students feel that their musical contributions are valued, they can feel safe to engage in dialogue and continue to make personal connections.

Decolonizing the music classroom requires consistent curiosity and reflexive practice (Bradley, 2012). Considering how diverse educational institutions are, this process will be different for every teacher. It will involve evaluation of individual privilege and power, and an awareness of how these identities are evidenced in our pedagogy. For the class as a whole, this can be extended into a collective reflection that involves student input. The Rawlings project assessed students through journal reflections, which gave teachers insight on how musical learning was perceived by individuals (DeVito et al., 2020). Moments of collective reflection can create opportunities for open dialogue between students and teachers about the experiences in the classroom.

Reflexive practice that involves individual and collective reflection can challenge educators and students alike to articulate their cultural perspectives and their implications. When students experience culturally responsive education in safe spaces where dialogue is welcomed, they are more likely to make personal connections to their learning. These connections create meaningful experiences and opportunities for students to celebrate their unique identity within our complex world.

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