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Dr. J. Dilendik, Moravian College

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Ms. Maryann Gross,  
Allentown School District

**Rethinking Secondary General Music: Culturally responsive pedagogy in  
the urban middle school classroom**

Amy L. Putlock

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## **Researcher's Stance**

I had no idea I was going to be a teacher when I was younger, but signs were certainly pointing me here since as early as sixth grade. There was no denying I was destined to be a musician - my parents enjoy reliving stories of me belting 1980's hair metal classics from my car seat or coercing my siblings into doing choreographed routines to our favorite 1990's pop hits. I eventually graduated to more formal music after dusting off an old cornet found in my grandparents' attic. I followed in the footsteps of my maternal grandfather and started my instrumental studies in my elementary school, propelling me directly to the career I am so lucky to have today.

It was just two years after starting my cornet/trumpet studies that my love for teaching became obvious. My sister is two years younger than I am and also wanted to play the trumpet. Unfortunately, she was too nervous to start the program in elementary school. She was undoubtedly (sometimes annoyingly) interested in learning music, so I began teaching her to play my trumpet using the method books I received from the school.

It was at that point that I took a tour of Moravian College. Our teachers wanted to inspire us to go to college someday and took us on tours of a few schools over the course of three years. I will never forget walking through the 1742 Single Brethren's House and hearing the music majors practicing all up and

down the halls, seeing a trio practice in Hearst Hall, and attending my first concert in Foy Hall. I fell in love with the idea that music and musicians would be accessible and that I could practice and perform each and every day.

Five years later I found myself preparing to audition for the Moravian College undergraduate music program to pursue a degree in music performance. I suppose the fates (or at the very least, my father) were there to point me in the right direction. I could not afford to purchase a French horn, the instrument I intended to audition on. Instead, I had to buy an inexpensive clarinet and resurrect what I had taught myself in the past to put an audition together in less than a month. Aside from that, my father had begun talking to me about what my plans were after college. He helped me to see that I could indeed have a career where I would get to make music and help others learn, combining both of my passions. At my audition, I filled out the form to indicate my interest in pursuing a music education degree.

I struggled to adapt to the classical style of the Moravian College Music Department. I was paying attention in my classes, practicing regularly, doing my work, but still felt very unfulfilled. After almost leaving the major twice during my sophomore and junior years, I finally realized that if I could not change the curriculum, I had to change the way I looked at it, so I made as much time as I could outside of my regular classes to meet up with friends who shared this

sentiment so that we could write and play the music we loved. I took what I learned from my classes and applied it to my own musical experiences as well as I could, setting the stage for my future career.

My pre-service teaching placements at Moravian instilled my desire to work in an urban setting. Although I am from rural America, I fell in love with the bustling streets, the diverse cultures, people, food, and music. My students were energetic and enthusiastic, eagerly welcoming me into their classrooms, but I sensed there was something misaligned. I dedicated the rest of my college career to studying urban education pedagogy and was ready to go into the field.

This experience built the foundation of my education philosophy as a music teacher. I knew that I wanted to cultivate the ability to reach my students, but I worried that the music methodologies I learned as an undergraduate student were not really connecting with my classes. My first two years were an exhausting series of trials and errors, and I struggled to make sense of why students were having so much trouble adapting to my pedagogy. I realized that I had to change the way I was thinking about music teaching—just as I had done as a college music student.

The root of the problem seems obvious. The United States, like Canada and Australia, is a country made up primarily of non-natives. As a result, American culture is not defined by a history of all-inclusive traditions, styles in

art, music, architecture, dance, etc., or even language- but the dynamic, diverse, and proud mixture of that which is brought from countless other countries and cultures. Consequently, my diverse student population too often is confronted with school curricula that is outdated, representing what was once considered the best pedagogical methods geared to a majority best described as White and Western-European. This does not benefit my students and is becoming less and less representative and relevant for America each and every day. McNiff (2013) echoes the danger of not giving students a voice when she discusses the lack of patient voice in the medical field or a nation's people in politics. She claims it is dangerous "where it is assumed that one group may export their knowledge to another, without due regard for local customs or indigenous epistemology" (p.10). Traditional music education, for the most part, worked for me because it is representative of me. This is where I must embody McNiff's (2013) premise: "'I change me' not 'I change you'" (p. 11).

I watch my students politely try to digest complex musical concepts as outlined by the new 2014 National Standards for Music Education. There is no doubt in my mind that they want to learn, but so many of them have an extra hurdle of unfamiliarity before they begin to work towards a better understanding of particular skill or concept; too often discouraged at the outset. American educators have a unique challenge in considering the multi-varied backgrounds of

their students. In doing so, we have to both be inclusive of various cultures represented in our classroom and find areas of common ground relevant to most, if not all, students.

American popular music has set the precedent for almost a century now. With the rise of rock n' roll and especially hip hop, American popular music is recognizable all over the world in both its original form and its influences. Like my students, I am a consumer of this music and have a deep appreciation for it. Its familiarity eliminates the first hurdle for students learning such a complex art as music and intrinsically motivates them to persist when it does get difficult. Students respond to relevance, and our sanctioned music curriculum is severely lacking in this regard with few exceptions.

Music is an inherent part of the human experience. Regardless of preferences, all of my students are consumers of music and interact with it continuously throughout their daily lives in various settings. Music creates the atmosphere for television and movies. Music provides background entertainment on the bus, in the car, the restaurant, the mall, and the grocery store. Music is used for celebration, for mourning, for honor, for worship, and for remembrance. Music accompanies dancing, provides an escape, resonates with us on our worst days, validates us on our best, inspires us, and energizes us. With such a strong presence, it only makes sense to invite music into the classroom!

Entering my action research, I ask the question: *How does a foundation of culturally relevant music (pop, hip-hop, culturally diverse) in the general music curriculum affect engagement and the acquisition of standardized music skills for middle school students?* The National Standards for Music Education focus on the universal artistic processes of creating, performing, responding, and connecting. Within each of these umbrellas, students acquire skills related to listening, beat, rhythm, pitch, tone, improvisation, and composition that are, by no means, exclusive to the traditional western art music educational paradigm. I want to use my students' musical experiences to build and refine these skills so they can continue to use them outside of the walls of my classroom.

My students' musical experiences at home are largely unlike those fabricated in schools. Music is a communal experience, one that requires interaction and mutual support and guidance. It reflects personal experiences: social, spiritual, and political, among others. It is rooted in relevance and should be seen as such in the classroom as well. Just as I learned to play folk music I heard at home as a child, my students should be using familiar, meaningful music to build their own musical skills.

I am fortunate to meet with my students every day for an entire marking period. During that time, I want to learn about how they experience music in their everyday lives through surveys and interviews. This information is powerful, as it

is what will ultimately drive my classroom instruction. I work to make my classroom as authentic as possible and, as such, I am the least important person in the room. It is my students and their lived experiences that creates the strongest foundation for learning. It is necessary for me to be open to their interests as they will very likely not directly align with mine. Just as there is a place in music education for classical concertos, there is a place for hip hop, rap, country, and metal among countless other genres. As I collect information about their interests and experience, I will choose resources, materials, and content for each of my classes so the standards can be accessible and speak specifically to each of my students.

As Dewey (1938) suggests, I do not intend to ignore those aspects of the traditional pedagogy which work as I move forward in my action research. I will, however, maintain an open mind and understand that my study's results may not align with my original purpose. Regardless, I recognize that the most meaningful musical experiences in my life were those shared with others in composing or performing music. These circumstances affected me on a personal level. As my students experience music in my classroom, I hope that I am able to foster inquiry and find ways to inspire students to value and use music for their lifetime. I believe they are all capable of being thoughtful performers and/or consumers of music and deserve a learning environment that respects their place in their

journey. I am interested in my students' thoughts and feedback regarding this study and am ready to go in any new or unanticipated direction it takes us, remembering McNiff's (2013) words,

I have come to see that there are no happy endings or 'end of' statements in action research, only new and more interesting (and probably more problematic) questions that form the beginning of new enquiries, always holding the spaces open for the emergence of new possibilities as new realities (p. 18).

## Literature Review

*“Then, as I’d navigated the landscape of formal education and played a game whose rules were enforced largely by white folks who teach in the hood, I became conditioned to be a ‘proper student’ and began to lose value for pieces of myself that previously defined me. My unabashed urbanness-loud, conspicuous, and questioning of authority-became lost.”*

*(Emdin, 2016, p. 35)*

If you were to walk into the typical urban general music classroom, you might notice some consistent symptoms from students such as low engagement, lack of motivation, and disinterest in participation in class activities. These behaviors are obvious by students’ body language and their response to instruction and impact skill acquisition as prescribed by state and national standards for music education. If students are unaware that they are conveying these symptoms, it is essential for the teacher to dig deeper and find the root cause. Generally, in the case of secondary general music education, Shaw and others suggest that this may be due to cultural incongruence.

As Julia Shaw (2016) explains:

In the face of rapid demographic change, responding to cultural diversity has become a central concern for music educators. Even as classrooms become increasingly racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse, a

“profound and inescapable cultural fabric of the schooling process” remains comprised of certain beliefs, formats, and perspectives that are so deeply ingrained in educational institutions that they are assumed to be normal (Boykin, 1994, p. 244). In music education, this fabric has historically been woven from Eurocentric paradigms, which have privileged the Western classical canon and its associated ideologies. (p. 46)

A majority of students have conceptualized music long before walking into the music classroom. Shaw’s (2016) assessment of students’ perceptions of home and school music illustrates a jarring experience for students. She found that the students who participated in this assessment actually feel as though their experiences or interests are somehow insignificant or less valuable to the school, due to an emphasis on the Eurocentric model of music education.

Music educators must unpack students’ perceptions of music in a culturally sensitive manner. Adam Kruse (2016) illustrates this using hip-hop and Western art music, saying, “judging hip-hop by the conventions of Western art music is like officiating a basketball game by the rules of ice hockey; you could do it, but it does not make sense and it is not fair” (p. 55). Similarly, students experience a misalignment of perceptions when they enter school music classes and thus do not feel represented in the curriculum.

Some educators have tried to address this lack of student representation by incorporating music textbooks that embrace multicultural music education. However, music texts typically use the Western classical canon as the foundation and views non-Western and popular music as novelty. Multicultural music and resources are widely represented in classroom instruction (use of instruments from particular regions, singing in different languages, etc.), but they do not necessarily build on the experiences and prior knowledge that students bring with them to school. Students experience isolated multicultural music instruction throughout their school music programs, but still lack meaningful connections to their personal musical knowledge. This is not to say that multicultural music instruction is not important or relevant in a music curriculum, but they are difficult to conceptualize when taught in isolation or taken out of context. In order to have a truly meaningful and validating experience in the general music classroom students need to have an experience that directly involves the student in the development of the curriculum and instruction.

In 2014 the National Association for Music Educators (NAfME) revised the national standards for music education in an effort to better represent all students in American schools. The standards are organized under the four artistic processes of *creating*, *performing*, and *responding*, with the last process of *connecting* existing within and between the other three. These processes are

common in all musical cultures and lend themselves well to a solution to the current issues associated with the traditional music education paradigm. NAFME notes the importance of these artistic processes by stating:

- Students need to have experience in creating, to be successful musicians and to be successful 21st century citizens.
- Students need to perform- as singers, as instrumentalists, and in their lives and careers.
- Students need to respond to music, as well as to their culture, their community, and their colleagues. (2014)

In surveying adults on their musical experiences in school and beyond, VanWeelden's (2004) data showed that all of these artistic processes could be found in their responses about what they experienced since graduation. Creating, performing, and responding are an undeniable part of the human experience and are found in all musical facets of American culture: celebration, worship, artful expression, entertainment, remembrance, and protest for instance. Although not all students will become musical composers in their lifetime, the skills associated with composition are readily transferable to many other careers and hobbies. Skills associated with performance go beyond stages and concert halls and into offices, classrooms, and laboratories. Response to music is not just a response to an aesthetic, but a conceptual understanding of culture, current and historical

events, and social contexts reflected through the manipulation of sound. The value of music is clear outside of the classroom and the new standards allow educators to more easily make that connection to their own instruction. This lays a solid foundation for what music education needs in order to best serve all students: culturally responsive pedagogy.

The traditional music education paradigm was absolutely responsive and authentic in a time and place where Western classical music was the popular music; when technology was not advanced enough to record inexpensively and instantly; when composition was limited to written notation; and when musical entertainment was limited to live performances alone. These contexts are important when studying this tradition, but as Adam Kruse (2016) suggests, we must “flip the script.” He encourages music teachers to deviate from current educational norms so that we can successfully evolve *with* music.

Hip-hop has remained prominent in pop culture for so long because of its ability to “stay fresh.” Kruse (2016) describes this freshness as a moving target that requires teachers to stay committed. He adds “beyond music, staying fresh also includes remaining informed about the latest in educational policy, advancements in various technologies, and developments in relevant research” (p. 30). The secondary general music classroom holds a special set of challenges for

educators, necessitating that they be lifelong learners, constantly evolving with society to stay culturally relevant and ultimately culturally responsive.

Matthew Thibeault (2013) is optimistic about the paradigm shift:

Fortunately, the lack of compelling traditions allows us to move quickly in new directions. The very openness that surrounds secondary general music affords the possibility to quickly adjust offerings and take advantage of interesting cultural opportunities. In other words, secondary general music can be culturally responsive and respectful. To assert the claim more boldly, secondary general music is uniquely positioned to be exceptionally responsive and respectful of our students' musical cultures...

(p. 36)

General music teachers are in a powerful position, often working with nearly every student in their building, to use their discipline as a vehicle for personal validation (Elizabeth McAnally 2013).

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Geneva Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive pedagogy as “using 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” (p. 31). This has special implications for music teachers,

as music is inherently very culturally loaded. In the music room, both Kimberly Weins (2015) and Carlos Abril (2013) cited Ladson-Billings' (2009) three categories that create a framework for culturally responsive pedagogy: conceptions of self and others, conceptions of knowledge, and social relations.

Conceptions of self and others has to do with the teacher's perspectives of their role in the classroom. This involves the teacher taking on the role of a resident artist and part of the community rather than a technician or one who simply delivers knowledge. They must value the wealth of prior knowledge their students already have and use their own to make the classroom a communal teaching and learning environment. Conceptions of knowledge acknowledges the complexities of the content area and encourages the teacher to embrace their subject area to best evolve with it and commit to the ever changing best practices in instruction (Abril, 2017).

These conceptions are especially important for music educators, given the constant evolution of the art from year to year. Social relations requires the teacher to build community, connect with all of their students, and work collaboratively inside the classroom and with the greater community beyond the school walls. This means knowing students as learners and citizens, family and community dynamics, and understanding how all of these impact their education. This involves a change in the role of the teacher as it has been seen traditionally,

but ultimately creates a more fulfilling and rewarding experience for everyone. Friere (2016) says “Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence” (p. 91). In situations where dialogue is built upon communal qualities, those involved can expect mutual trust to be the result (Friere, 2016).

### **Authenticity**

At the heart of culturally responsive pedagogy is the concept of authenticity. Kruse (2016) agrees with those scholars who describe authenticity as an action rather than a condition, as it changes and evolves in varied contexts. The representation of one’s place, culture, and true self is both essential and valued. Authenticity from the students’ perspective is natural under supportive circumstances. It is the teacher who is the variable in fostering a learning environment that promotes such authenticity. Kruse (2016) writes:

As teachers and students engage with any type of music, it is valuable to understand the geographic, historical, social, and political contexts from which that music comes, but when creating their own music, students might also be focused on connecting to their own contextual experiences. (p. 54)

This brings back into consideration the paradox of multicultural education versus culturally responsive pedagogy. Abril (2013) described a unit in a general music classroom that focused on Peruvian music. Students listened to and performed music from Peru, discussed it contextually, and even built Peruvian instruments. He explained that this unit appeared to be informed by the multicultural music education movement. While it was comprehensive and representative of students in the class, it still lacked the personal connections inherent within culturally responsive pedagogy. Multicultural education is just a small part of culturally responsive pedagogy. Had the teacher involved students with personal experiences with Peruvian music in the planning and execution of the lesson, it would have approached the bar of culturally responsive pedagogy.

While teachers are generally enthusiastic about culturally responsive pedagogy, there are numerous pitfalls associated with poor implementation. Shaw (2016) interviewed students on the perceived barriers of their teacher's implementation of it and they raised three major concerns: (a) determining what music is culturally relevant is complex and challenging, (b) it is impossible to address every conceivable culture and therefore impossible to practice culturally responsive pedagogy equitably, and (c) isolated instances of culturally responsive pedagogy are not sufficient in creating a genuinely culturally responsive

classroom. Fortunately, with adequate preparation and consideration, these issues can begin to be addressed.

### **Teacher Preparedness**

Moving toward culturally responsive pedagogy in the music classroom starts with teacher preparedness. Thibeault (2013) describes the underlying issue in undergraduate music education tracks by claiming “it is a challenge to rally around the amorphous blob that is secondary general music, particularly when virtually no professional preparation exists in a college degree” (p. 36). A cyclical issue is also pointed out here. Those who become music teachers are so often the same few students who felt represented and successful in the original music education paradigm. Because of their positive experience in their own K-12 education, they continue to proliferate the cycle of outdated instructional practices and cultural incongruencies that so many of their peers experienced. Of those who became music teachers, most did not do so in pursuit of a secondary general music position and, due to lack of undergraduate preparation and subsequent professional development, lack the competence and confidence to be successful in their position (Thibeault, 2013). Shaw (2015) supports this in citing the thorough documentation of the failure of teacher education programs to support and prepare preservice teachers for positions in urban schools with significant cultural diversity. Doyle (2014) agrees, saying, “preservice teachers

are generally trained in college to teach in the Western classical tradition and create music programs similar to those they experienced” (p. 48).

All classroom methodologies taught in traditional undergraduate music education programs are based on Western classical ideologies, such as Dalcroze, Orff, and Kodaly, and are targeted towards elementary students. Dalcroze Eurhythmics is a rhythm, pitch, and movement focused methodology developed in Switzerland by Émile Jaques-Dalcroze. While its emphasis on rote learning and movement can be compatible with culturally responsive pedagogy, its aim is to prepare young children for intensive musical studies in adolescence. While not technically a methodology, Orff Schulwerk is an approach to music education developed by German composer, Carl Orff. It simulates play in a safe and comfortable atmosphere for children to explore music. This can mean eliminating “wrong notes” from keyboard instruments for improvisational purposes or making rigid guidelines for performance activities that keep students feeling successful. Like Dalcroze, this approach is geared towards young children. The Kodály Method was developed in Hungary by Zoltán Kodály. This methodology is the most readily applicable in the middle school general music classroom. Utilizing solfege syllables (do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti), corresponding hand signs, and rhythmic syllables it emphasizes ear training and written notation. While these methodologies and approaches are very effective in the Western classical canon

that Shaw (2016) described, they often miss the mark in culturally responsive pedagogy. Robin Giebelhausen (2015) summarizes this issue, writing:

Middle school general music is an experience that numerous music educators feel underprepared to teach. Because many undergraduate programs spend little time on this teaching scenario and because the challenges of middle school general music are different from those of elementary general music or middle school ensembles, teachers often lack the knowledge to create and appropriate curriculum for the clientele (p. 41).

Until major changes are made in undergraduate teacher education programs, it is up to the teachers to enter their classroom prepared. Secondary general music teachers, particularly in urban schools, have challenges that are unlike their music teaching peers in the instrumental and elementary arenas, so professional development within school districts often overlooks them. Because of this, Elizabeth McAnally (2013) suggests that

The need to examine our own biases, the mandate to know our students beyond a superficial level, the opportunity to empower and validate children, the focus on students' strengths rather than deficits, and the refusal to make excuses or accept less than success

are appropriate and respectful steps in improving our efforts on behalf of children living in poverty. (p. 27)

Teachers must therefore use the skills they acquired in their undergraduate education coursework to seek out additional information and support. McAnnally (2013) also suggests that teachers encourage targeted professional development from NAFME and build related support systems to adequately address this issue.

### **Community Engagement**

Numerous researchers agree that community engagement is a necessary aspect of a holistic approach to culturally responsive pedagogy (Shaw, 2016; Weins, 2015; McAnnally, 2013; Kruse, 2016). In many classrooms, the teacher works alone to develop lesson plans from a prescribed curriculum or textbook and consult little to no outside input. The lack of community involvement is a source of the cultural incongruence that so many students experience in general music.

Students' musical experiences usually begin with their family. From the time they are born, they hear lullabies and their parents' and siblings' favorite songs. Music is a part of celebrations and of worship. It surrounds them and becomes part of their identity. To honor this and represent it in our instruction, it is important to reach out to students' families and community members. Shaw (2015) warns against making assumptions about students' "homeland" music, later asserting that "various social spaces (e.g., school, home, and church) shaped

children's musical experiences in distinctive ways" (Shaw, 2016, p. 47). Talking directly to families and seeking their input helps the teacher to avoid any issues associated with such assumptions and gives a more comprehensive understanding of each student's cultural identity.

Shaw (2015) suggests also looking beyond the family and into the immediate school community for resources. Local colleges/universities, cultural centers, places of worship, theatres, and music venues can offer supports and supplemental resources to school music programs. These groups and institutions are often seeking educational partnerships and give students the opportunity to further engage with their community. Working with varied groups from within the community encourages the validation of some students' cultures and the simultaneous expansion of others' cultural horizons in an authentic setting.

### **Student Voice, Student Choice**

Ultimately all of this is for the sake of serving the students, who also happen to be the greatest resource in culturally responsive pedagogy. Honoring student voice is both the means and the end of this approach. Through surveys, interviews, and voting among other methods for gathering specific information, teachers can get a full picture of their students' needs so curriculum and instruction can be designed most effectively. This also inherently validates

students' experiences and prior knowledge, building a strong and respectful relationship between teacher and student- the foundation of great instruction.

Kimberly Weins (2015) recalls a failed lesson plan, her students' responses, and an important lesson:

In all my efforts to create a group project that would encompass all I had learned, I had forgotten to consider my students' personal needs. I learned that my students were, for the most part, aware of what made them successful learners, and it was that information that I needed to tap into to create a place where my students would feel valued. (p. 23)

She explains that this relationship with students is in alignment with Freire's concept of horizontal dialogue, "shifting the power to working with our students instead of teaching to our students" (p. 20).

Part of this is also creating room for student choice. Higher education has seen a push for competency-based education and it has begun to show up in K-12 education as well. The competency-based assessment model lends itself well to providing student choice in the general music classroom. The U.S. Department of Education describes Competency-Based Education (or Personalized Learning):

Transitioning away from seat time, in favor of a structure that creates flexibility, allows students to progress as they demonstrate

mastery of academic content, regardless of time, place, or pace of learning. Competency-based strategies provide flexibility in the way that credit can be earned or awarded, and provide students with personalized learning opportunities. These strategies include online and blended learning, dual enrollment and early college high schools, project-based and community-based learning, and credit recovery, among others. This type of learning leads to better student engagement because the content is relevant to each student and tailored to their unique needs. (np)

With a foundation of state and national standards, students can demonstrate competency in those skills through means most meaningful and appropriate for them given their personal experiences, interests, and prior knowledge. This means providing multiple avenues for students to prove their understanding, whether teacher developed, student developed, or a combination of the two. For example, rhythm is a basic component of music and can be shown in any style of music in various settings through various mediums (live performance, recordings, drums, drum machines, rhythm sticks, etc.). It also allows the students to make improvements through multiple assessments if they are not at first successful. At its core, student choice within competency-based assessment is differentiated instruction with strong, personalized supports. Synonymous with

personalized learning, competency-based education lends itself well to culturally responsive pedagogy. This system validates the student's culture while providing them opportunities to explore the unfamiliar and expand their understanding of music in varied cultural contexts.

Kruse (2016) describes a culturally responsive classroom in which students watched and analyzed a music video by a Syrian rapper that focused on the impact of violence on their community. While the student population wasn't Syrian, they were able to access the information and discuss the content through the familiar and relevant vehicle of hip-hop music. Students were encouraged to discuss the video in the contexts of music, language, and social studies before moving forward to create their own compositions based on a similar theme. Through this type of instruction, students are exploring the multidisciplinary power of music while also using it to find and use their own voice.

### **Conclusion**

Julia Shaw (2016) provides a framework for best practices in culturally responsive teaching:

Effective culturally responsive teaching also encompasses basing instruction on detailed knowledge of students' biographies and identities, ensuring the cultural validity of content and learning experiences, involving students' families in their education,

attending to students' learning and communication styles, addressing sociopolitical issues and tensions through open dialogue, and honoring students' expert knowledge in the classroom. (p. 65)

She echoes the importance of community engagement, authenticity, and student voice, and this is all possible through adequate teacher preparation.

The United States of America is unique, in having a society comprised of so many remarkably different cultures. In order to effectively and meaningfully serve all of our students for the public education system to effectively and meaningfully serve all of our students, we must acknowledge that paradigms that work in culturally homogeneous societies will not have the same impact in the classroom. Educators must work to address the cultural incongruences that our students face and provide a culturally responsive curriculum to serve them respectfully. A forced assimilation into White Western European ideologies in music education is not going to effectively engage, or evolve to represent the current times. Education without representation of our students' cultures lacks authenticity. It is through authenticity, with community engagement and the honoring of our students' voices that we can become truly culturally responsive educators.

Music educators are in a powerful position to validate the cultural experiences of students and build a more connected and unified community within the increasingly diverse student population. I intend to use research conducted on culturally responsive pedagogy to examine the curriculum in my culturally diverse urban middle school general music classroom. Through sufficient preparation, authenticity, community engagement, and my students' active role in planning, instruction, and assessment, I hope to see them meet state and national standards more quickly and with a deeper, more personally meaningful understanding. Through these new practices, I want to build a learning environment that promotes creative, validating, and fulfilling musical experiences in my classroom that can be carried with my students beyond the walls of the school building.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Goals**

Teaching middle school general music classes has made me feel like more of a student than an educator. Despite the updated standards for music education, outdated curriculum and resources have left the secondary classroom in its already uncomfortable adolescent stage without the supports necessary to make it as beneficial to students as it can be. I have always felt very connected to my students, but I could not continue to ignore that there was an important piece missing in the curriculum that has been keeping them from reaching standards as quickly, efficiently, and thoroughly as their peers in suburban and rural schools. I wanted to deliberately put myself in my students' shoes and allow them to be my teacher over the course of two marking periods so that I could learn about music from their perspectives. The goal of my research was to document the observed behaviors and reported experiences of 8th grade general music students when culturally responsive music replaced the Western Classical Canon in music education pedagogy.

### **Setting / Participants**

I teach in a particularly interesting, large district in Eastern Pennsylvania. Although the student body of the entire district is comprised of 45.4% White,

38.8% Hispanic, 9.9 % African American, and 5.9% Asian and/or Native American, my specific school's demographic representation is very different. My study was conducted in a middle school that consists of a 16% White, 70.8% Hispanic, 10.5% African American, and 0.9% Asian student body. We serve as a significant demographic outlier within our own district. Additionally, 89.5% of my students are economically disadvantaged (compared to 51% district wide), 14% are English Language Learners (compared to 5% district wide), and 27% have an Individual Education Plan (compared to 15% district wide).

I conducted my research over the course of two marking periods in my fourth period, eighth grade general music classes with two separate groups of students. The first group consisted of seventeen students: six ESOL, nine IEP (one gifted IEP), five 504 Plans, and two Regular Education. The second group also consisted of seventeen students: two ESOL, three IEP (one gifted), six 504 Plans, and eight Regular Education.

We worked in two classrooms throughout the course of the study. The first is a large, general music classroom, equipped with speakers, television, overhead projector, and seats in five rows for short bursts of large group, direct instruction. Because it is so spacious, students can move the desks around for smaller group projects and discussions. The second is a music technology lab, equipped with fifteen stations. Each has two seats, an iMac computer, a Korg

synthesizer, and two sets of headphones. The room is much smaller and windowless, but generally stays quiet because of the nature of the work conducted there.

We spent most of our time in the music technology lab, where I constructed a website on Google Sites to serve as the homepage for each computer. This site holds all of the resources for class so that students always have the option to work ahead or seek out further enrichment opportunities or support for projects of particular interest. I also utilized Google Classroom in order to organize all assignments and student work.

### **Data Sources**

During this research study, my students participated in an internally flipped classroom with student-centered instruction. They utilized technology throughout the study to take surveys, submit assignments, conduct inquiry research, and communicate with both myself and each other.

I first submitted my proposal, parent consent, and student assent forms to the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) of Moravian College. My proposal (see Appendix A) required revisions before it was ultimately approved. Upon its approval, I distributed the parent consent (see Appendix B) and student assent forms (see Appendix C) to my first marking period group of students in September and my second marking period group in November.

Various sources which comprise my collected data include a pre-course survey, observation, reflective interview questions, student compositions, performance data/competency checklists, and reflective surveys. Students actively participated in data collection and analysis in group discussions. While all student work was kept confidential, analysis of the work was openly shared with the class per the nature of the study.

**Surveys.** Students began with a pre-course survey (see Appendix D) so that I could gather information about their musical experiences. In this survey I asked students about their musical experiences outside of school so we could integrate them throughout their studies during the marking period. I also inquired about their anxiety and enthusiasm for learning school music, and what songs they were interested in learning to play. I used this information to structure my curriculum so that students were given the necessary supports and enrichment opportunities. During Back-to-School night and Parent Teacher Conferences, I asked willing parents in our school community to talk about their family's musical experiences in the Home Music Survey (see Appendix E). In this survey parents described their heritage, languages spoken at home, songs they sang with their children (lullabies, for learning, for celebration, etc.), and music they simply enjoy recreationally. This survey helped me discover culturally relevant (and diverse) musical resources to deliver standardized content. I was able to find

patterns that I had not initially expected and hurdles I hadn't initially anticipated. I followed up with my students about their favorite music and perceptions of their family and peers' musical interests in the Favorite Music Survey (see Appendix F). This survey helped me compare parent and student perceptions of music so I could work to align both with the standards and the curriculum. The final survey was the Course Reflection Survey (see Appendix G). I used this to gauge my students' perceptions of the cultural responsiveness of the class. Using rating scales, they responded to prompts about how useful this course was to their musical lives outside of school, how much they felt their interest were reflected in the curriculum, and their interests regarding different aspects of the curriculum (piano and composition). It concluded with open ended questions about what aspects of the course should be kept and which can be improved (and suggestions for their improvement). I used this data to make adjustments between Marking Periods One and Two and between Two and Three. The first time this survey data was collected I drastically altered my approach; the second data collected thus reflected the reception to the improvements in response to the first.

**Interviews.** I conducted interviews with students on a weekly basis. Most of these interviews were informal and simply helped us check in with each other about areas of confidence and opportunities for more support. We met during independent work time and the questions were reflective in nature.

Students were given time to articulate their frustrations and I was able to work with them to create systems that would be most effective and beneficial. On a biweekly basis, I conducted formal interviews to keep track of my students' evolving perceptions of the content and how it relates to that which they are expected to learn according to state and national standards for music education. This feedback was helpful in directing instruction to accessible and engaging resources that were authentically student-centered. When survey results were analyzed, we discussed them as a class to find patterns and brainstorm creative ways to modify the curriculum and instructional strategies. It also helped students to understand the *why* of some content and techniques and facilitated community building since we could work towards a common goal collectively.

**Student Compositions.** A significant component of my 8th grade curriculum is music composition. I collected both word processed documents and recorded musical compositions of participating students to analyze the connections between their musical interests outside of school, genres and styles represented in their original music, and the connections to state and national standards for music education. These composition analyses were often coupled with short interviews so students could articulate their intentions throughout the composition process. They served as examples to other students when shared and

helped me to support students in composing in styles in which I was, at first, unfamiliar.

**Performance Data/Competency Checklists.** The other most important component of my curriculum is piano techniques. I used competency checklists in order to structure the piano instruction element of the course. By giving feedback in real time to students through private piano performances, I could assess their successes, give advice regarding improvements, and allow students to vocalize areas where they need more support or were struggling to connect. I dated the competency checklists to see how quickly they were acquiring skills as outlined by state and national standards and used that data to build other support systems (particularly through the use of technology and gamification) that would lead to more efficient acquisition of standard music skills.

**Field Log.** I recorded daily observations into an electronic journal. During my lunch break, I quickly recorded objective data about what occurred in class, students' quotes jotted down on post-it notes, and marked days that I conducted surveys, interviews, or discussions. In the evenings, I revisited the field log so that I could analyze what I had written and record my perceptions and predictions based on what happened each day.

While sorting through my data at the conclusion of its collection, I coded it to discover the major themes of my research. These became my theme statements that would synthesize my findings throughout my study.

### **Trustworthiness Statement**

The trustworthiness and validity of this study were ensured by following a specific set of ethical guidelines. Prior to the start of my study, both my building Principal and Assistant Principal approved of my research after meeting with them and discussing its nature and intentions. I also submitted a written proposal to and was then approved by the Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board (see Appendix A). Once these approvals were secured, I sent home two forms with each student. My students' parents/guardians received a Parent Consent Form (see Appendix B), which provided information about my research and asked for a parent/guardian's permission for the student to participate in the study. By signing this, they understood that all students in the class would experience the same music curriculum, but only data from research participants would be used in my study. It explained that all student data would be coded using pseudonyms and presented as such to protect the identity of the students. All data was kept in a locked closet in my locked office in the school and was discussed with colleagues and professors only with pseudonyms. The second was the Student Assent Form (see Appendix C), which also described my

study and the students' role in it. They were informed that participation was completely optional and that they were entitled to remove themselves from the study at any time without penalty if they chose to do so.

Once I received both assent from my students and consent from their parents/guardians, I began my study. Throughout all of the surveys and interviews, I encouraged students to be honest without penalty, explaining that their honesty is the only way to make this research authentic. Their honesty caused my research to change directions in often subtle, but sometimes exceptional ways. I then engaged in persistent and prolonged observations, gathering substantial amounts of data, and ensuring that it was recorded accurately (Hendricks, 2013). In order to do so, I kept both a daily field log for purely objective data with comprehensive descriptions of the setting and study (Hendricks, 2013) and a regular reflective journal to voice any of my subjective interpretations, questions, and predictions. I collected data in different ways, utilizing surveys, interviews, field observations, and skill mastery check-points to triangulate my data sources and increase the credibility of my findings (Hendricks, 2013). I kept all of my data in a series of binders and Google Drive folders to make an audit trail available over the course of the study (Hendricks, 2013).

The analysis of my collected data required specific strategies for increasing validity. I discussed my study and interpretations of data with my colleague (the instrumental music teacher in my building, who is not directly invested in my research) as to utilize authentic peer debriefing (Hendricks, 2013). During our aligned prep-periods, I shared my interpretations of my data collection and invited him to give me his honest feedback as to draw attention to any biases I may have been holding (Hendricks, 2013). I also discussed my interpretations of the data with my students, effectively implementing member checks as they are directly involved in the study. They gave me yet another opportunity to check my own biases within the study. In instances where negative cases were presented, I analyzed them to find their deeper meanings and used the results accordingly (Hendricks, 2013).

Once all of my data was collected and coded, I followed two more steps to ensure trustworthiness and validity. I first presented my results to key audiences. I engaged colleagues in my building, my administrators, graduate classmates, students, and their parents/guardians in this process and requested their feedback on the study and its conclusions (Hendricks, 2013). Finally, I continued to engage in ongoing reflective planning (Hendricks, 2013). I remained flexible with alterations and open to unexpected re-directions so that my students stayed safe and central to the research.

## **My Story**

As a musician, I have always been sensitive to the reactions of my audience. The same can be said of my sensitivity to my students. Whenever I sense any lack of engagement, I immediately jump into performance mode. The music classroom has an inherent capacity for engagement, whether through communal artistry or the simple act of making noise. Unfortunately, I felt as though I was losing my students entirely too frequently in a course that had so much to offer. When it came to identifying a problem of practice, this was not only an obvious choice, but an area in desperate need of change.

My eighth grade curriculum is one that has the most opportunities for drastic improvement. Built upon the concepts of musicianship through piano performance, music technology, and composition, it has areas of interest for nearly all of my students. I also wanted to work with my eighth grade classes because I will have had the pleasure of getting to know them for two years prior to the start of the study. Their class sizes were slightly smaller than the other two grade levels, allowing the study to be more focused. Additionally, they were already familiar with enough of my classroom routines and procedures to make a prospective action research study less daunting. The idea of making my eighth grade music course something my students could be genuinely excited about

fueled my preparation for my action research over the summer and kept me enthusiastic about it all the way through my data collection process.

I spent the summer preparing all of the logistical paperwork (consent and assent forms) and data collection tools (surveys, interview questions, etc.), but wanted to leave much of what I had planned open to change. For my instruction to be truly culturally responsive, I had to make my students' input central and allow them to lead the way in rebuilding the curriculum. Because I had found in the literature that multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy are not at all synonymous, I felt it would be inauthentic for me to make any attempt at creating for them what I thought they would appreciate without their direct input.

I structured the data collection process in two separate phases. The first was to structure my course the same way I always had, with open forums for student reflection and input. During the first marking period, my students would evaluate and make suggestions about what and how they were learning so that I could make both immediate and long-term improvements. The second phase was a curriculum based completely on the reflections and suggestions of the previous group. During this time students were once again asked to evaluate and make suggestions for any further improvements and comment on their own experiences with the new curriculum.

I introduced my study on the first day of school to my students in the most digestible way I knew: self-deprecation. I admitted that my increasing age was moving me further and further away from new music and pop culture trends and that I am not nearly as *hip* as I used to be. Because I am less and less an expert on their music, I asked them to switch roles with me so that I could learn more about what they are listening to and experiencing. We agreed that the music they listen to outside of school and that they listen to inside of school tends to be vastly different. I knew the only way to bridge the two musical experiences was for my students to bring the curriculum to each other. I sought ways in which to give them the opportunity to speak openly and without fear about what music really means to them. We agreed that the only way to make valuable changes was to be honest with each other. We arranged to use anonymous surveys when necessary for students to feel safe in expressing themselves honestly and comfortably.

I began with a survey using a Google Form (see Appendix H). My students logged on to Google Classroom in class to begin the process of completing the survey and I noticed frustration almost immediately from nearly half of the class. I realized then that the way I had worded my questions was not easily understood by many of my students, especially my English Language Learners. The questions/prompts were: (1) *What purpose does music serve for you outside of school?* (2) *What purpose does music serve for you in school?* (3)

*In what ways are your musical experiences in school and outside of school similar?* (4) *In what ways are your musical experiences in school and outside of school different?* (5) *What do you think is missing from music classes in school?* (6) *How do you think Miss Putlock can make school music more meaningful to you?* Not only were the questions inaccessible to many of my students, but I also neglected to provide translations when necessary. This was something I had to address immediately. I rephrased the questions from my English speakers and used my own limited Spanish proficiency to translate the question to my ELLs (all of whom spoke Spanish as a first language). After this, they were able to better answer the questions, but many still struggled to find the words to best describe their feelings regarding each prompt. I decided that this would be my first revision. I would rephrase the prompts and assign a numerical rating system to each so that students would be able to respond more confidently.

After reading and analyzing the results of the survey myself, I wanted to share them with the students so we could decide how to move forward together. We agreed that the differences between “school music” and “music” (what we called “home music”) are extreme. We also decided that our approach should be to find more avenues to integrate the music they love and continue to engage more in music technology.

I used this information to make the first adjustment to the curriculum. I decided to tackle the composition aspect of the course, since this is where students would have the most room for self-expression. We primarily utilize Garageband in class and we found through class discussions that it was well-equipped for the styles of music in which my students wished to compose. In studying form, they were given the parameters for three standard classical forms (binary, ternary, and rondo) and composed original pieces of music using Garageband loops in varying styles. The form starts with simple structures and increase in complexity so that students can be confident and successful as the progress as composers. These projects were my first glimpses into the genres of music that resonated with my students.

After about a week of regular instruction, the first adjusted assignment was on Binary Form. I presented this as their first composition project and immediately sensed anxiety. In order to address this, I divided the class in half and had one group walk through the composition process with me while the other half continued their piano and music theory studies (as they had been since the first day of school). During my direct instruction time, we composed a piece in binary form together, selecting loops as a group and assessing their quality when played along with the other layers. When we, as a group, were satisfied with the

product, we listened to it and walked through its final submission using Google Classroom.

Working in these small groups immediately relieved the students' anxiety. They hurried back to their stations and began working diligently. My favorite part of this process was the laughter that came from fun samples and their eagerness to share their final work with each other, and even me, despite it not being a requirement of the project.

This enthusiasm continued through the next composition project. Ternary form required my students to expand the original binary form with a repeated A section (AB vs ABA). We compared the repetitiveness of the A section to a chorus in pop music and a hook in hip-hop. With these clear connections drawn in our pre-composition discussion, you could hear their influence in the projects later submitted by the class. Their compositional personalities were beginning to show, with some leaning towards latin samples, others toward club dance samples, and others still choosing to be experimental and eclectic.

I wanted to take a moment to check in with some students after they had been working on some of the adjusted assignments. I inquired about what they were looking to learn while in music class so I could find ways to support their endeavours. One said, "I want to learn how to produce music, like hip-hop music. I want to write my own beats and make my own songs and stuff." This aligned

perfectly with the music technology aspect of the curriculum. I made a note to teach him how to connect the synthesizers to the computer to use it as a MIDI keyboard. A second student said, “I want to be able to play piano at my church. We have musicians that play at church sometimes and some of them are kids. I want to do that too.” I asked her what kind of music was played at her church and she came to school with a hymnal. We picked out one for us to work on together that had some of the same right hand concepts she was working on in class. A third student said, “I want to write songs. I write lyrics but I don’t have beats for them.” I followed up by asking what type of music he wanted to write, and he described to me his love of rap and hip-hop. I caught him on multiple occasions playing around with the loops samples on Garageband and was inspired to create an assignment option to write an original hip-hop song. Using some USB mics, I was able to show him how to record his voice into the computer and he spent multiple days after school recording himself in the music lab. Their suggestions were so well-tuned to the school resources and created meaningful connections to their own musical worlds. I had to find a way to directly integrate this inquiry approach into the curriculum.

I wanted to dig deeper into my students’ home music experiences, so I created a survey (see Appendix F) to see what music they enjoyed in their childhood. Much of the piano curriculum is built on American folk music,

particularly children's songs. I worried that it was not particularly representative of the cultural and linguistic diversity and was fully prepared to make changes based on their answers. What I discovered surprised me. This survey and the subsequent conversation I had with some students led me to realize that schools are basically sculpting many of my students' early musical experiences. For some of my ELLs, I was surprised to see that they were using songs like the ABCs and Old MacDonald to the same degree as native English speakers. I asked them where they heard this music and all of my students unanimously replied that they learned it in school- especially in Kindergarten. While I do not feel like it is particularly culturally responsive to continue to include this music in my classroom, it does serve the purpose I had originally sought from my students' answers: familiarity. The familiarity of a song provides a framework and a manner of self-assessment for students learning to play an instrument. While I had expected students to tell me about songs I had not heard before, I was interested to see that these English children's songs were almost unanimously familiar and accessible. They appeared to be universally taught to all at lower levels of education.

To follow up on this information, I asked them about their favorite music in that survey (see Appendix F) as well. As I explained what information I was seeking, several students expressed concerns about the music they were going to

share. “Miss, my music has bad words in it.” “But my music is in Spanish.” “I don’t think you’d like it.” It seems my students had already formulated what “school music” is and have preconceived ideas about what their own favorite music means-or doesn’t mean- to the curriculum. “What are you going to do with the answers?” another asked me nervously. I explained that I would be making a playlist and listening for melodies that I could use to update their piano manual. I saw their eyes light up. “Can we play those songs when you’re done?” “Of course,” I said, “that’s the point!”

As I looked through the responses, I realized that I had some serious hurdles to consider. In encouraging my students to be completely honest about their answers, I opened a door to quite a bit of music that would be deemed “inappropriate” by typical school standards. Much of it (even in the titles alone) included substantial amounts of profanity and/or was sexually explicit. Others glorified drug use, objectified women, and included violence. I acknowledged that it was going to be a real struggle and decided to seek out more student input. I did not want them to feel defensive. I wanted them to be able to be as open and honest as possible, so I did not confront the issue immediately. I wanted to find a way to word it so that they were not made to feel wrong for liking and listening to this music. I just wanted to guide them towards music that would be more accessible for use in the classroom. I asked the class, “Why do you feel school

music and your home music are so different based on your survey answers?” One said, “Our music has bad stuff in it and you aren’t allowed to teach that in school.” Another commented, “It’s just words, though, and it’s real. I think we’re old enough to deal with it.” Another concluded, “Music is life, Miss. I feel like an outcast in music class because we aren’t allowed to learn about what I like. I know it’s not appropriate or whatever, but it’s true.”

We went through our current curriculum together to discuss songs to keep. In reflecting on John Dewey’s (1938) ideas about not completely abandoning the traditional approach, we had to rethink what songs were effective. We discussed the relationship between the familiarity of songs and why they can be learned so easily. We also agreed that unfamiliar songs are important to learn as well since they challenge you to pay more attention to the written notation and be less dependent on your ear for guidance.

I became overwhelmed with ideas about how I wanted to change my curriculum for the following marking period. I came to find, through Friere (1970), that there is a point where you have to use traditional means as a way of accessing the newest, most current and relevant material. Unfortunately much of what my students enjoy is too complex to use as basic teaching material. It is, however, the perfect motivation to get them to reach and ultimately surpass the national and state standards for music education. What I needed to develop was a

more clear track for students to arrive at that point. If I chose multiple end-games for students, they could prepare accordingly. This was the perfect opportunity to combine musical competencies with the inquiry-based composition projects. I hoped that choosing their own path through the course would help them meet and exceed more standards while also helping them feel very much seen in the curriculum. This is where my students voices became the focus of my study.

### **Rafael**

Rafael is an 8th grade student with no formal musical music instruction. He is always polite in class, but never shies away from challenging something he does not understand - whether it is an assignment, a lesson, or a deadline. I always admired his bravery and wanted to hear his perspective on my study, having felt as though he would certainly give me his honest opinion.

I was not prepared to interview him when it happened. He came to me first wanting to talk about my class and get his voice on the record. “This class is really hard, Miss,” he began. I frowned, bracing myself for what was going to come next. “I’m just not a music person, Miss. I like basketball and sports. I can’t do piano, like, it’s not for me.”

“Is there a kind of music that *is* for you?”

“I like listening to music. But when we did that survey thing before, my answers were the ones with all the bad words in it and we can’t do that in school.”

“What makes you feel that way?”

“I don’t know, it’s not appropriate. It’s not what we’re supposed to learn about in school. We’re supposed to learn like classical music or whatever.”

“Do you think there’s something I can change about this class to make it more meaningful to you.”

“I don’t think so. Like I said, I’m just not a music person I guess.”

Our conversation made me see the real gap in the curriculum and how alienated many of my students were feeling by the perceived barrier between school music and home music. He was right about his answers to the survey not being suited for educational content. I could not hit ‘play’ on one of his favorite songs and have the class analyze it or have the choir perform it. Rafael exposed the problem and it only took him one day to come up with a solution.

My classroom door flung open the next day during fourth period and Rafael walked straight up to me, his words flying from his mouth in an excited and almost incomprehensible jumble. He caught his breath.

“I have an idea,” he exhaled. “What if we figured out the form of our favorite songs on our own and did compositions based on them?”

“Tell me more, “ I inquired.

“Well, we can’t listen to the songs at school, but we can listen to them at home or on our phones or something. Then we can write down the form using the

letters like you taught us. Then we can use that to make up our own song on Garageband, kinda like we've been doing in class already.”

Rafael created a way to look at song form using the most authentic approach to culturally relevant music: individual choice. He tied it directly to the existing curriculum, and challenged me (or rather, gave me the opportunity) to become more acquainted with the music my students loved as I assessed their analyses. The Choice Song Analysis assignment became a permanent part of my curriculum immediately.

Rafael's contribution to this study was a pivotal moment in the research. Instead of focusing on the input aspect of the curriculum (what resources, musical examples, etc.), I needed to look more closely at how students could express their understanding and skill acquisition in the output aspect of the curriculum.

Using what I had learned from previous survey data about students' prior musical experiences (particularly in childhood), I chose not to change anything about the piano technique development aspect of the curriculum. Instead, I changed their final song to a “choice song,” where they were required to select a piece of music on their own (through either free sheet music websites, my own collection of popular music books, or by purchasing pieces I did not already have). I hoped that seeing the written notation to music they loved would inspire

my students to work diligently to acquire the skills necessary to play it on their own.

The major output I changed was the final project. I had previously assigned students a film score project where they were to put music, sound effects, and character voice-overs to a short movie or cartoon clip of their choosing. While it was well-received, I decided this would be a good place for more student choice. I moved forward with Rafael's idea and turned the final project into three separate options: the Film Score Project, Pop Song-Writing, and Hip-Hop Song-Writing. For the latter assignments, students reflected on their experiences with the genre of music they chose and identify their personal significance, inspirational artists, and lyrical/musical analyses. They then wrote the lyrics to their song and ultimately provide the music to it, either through Garageband loops, MIDI controllers, or real instruments (guitar, piano, etc.) depending on their artistic interests. This is where I saw the biggest changes in my students' perceptions of the course.

### **Ethan**

Ethan is an eighth grade boy, who, much like Rafael, has no fear in challenging that which he doesn't understand. He is also quite keen on having the hard discussions and "telling it like it is." His personal narrative about rap music helped me understand the conflict that many of my students are feeling about

school music and presented me with the challenge of breaking this notion. He wrote:

I define rap as the younger generation's music, mostly due to teenagers and young adults listening to the music. I personally think that younger people listen to it because it has a certain rhythm to it that makes it appealing. Also a younger generation doesn't really appeal to older generations because there is a generational barrier. What I mean about this generational barrier is for example look at the past by every ten years everything would change and the generation from like 10-20 years ago would call it horrible or "the devil's music." This happened to rock and jazz but now it's happening to rap.

My earliest experiences with rap were when I was just a kid. My mother listened to rappers and I heard them when I was playing with my toys and it wasn't that bad. There was one complication: when I would listen sometimes if it was appropriate, my dad still didn't like the concept of people listening to rap. He didn't like the genre at all due to him growing up in a traditional African baptist home. See, even if my dad is a young parent it doesn't mean that he liked the thought of younger kids listening to it. So when I was a kid, I thought rap was bad but in the 5th grade I met a few friends who I'm still friends with today, and they

re-introduced me to the genre. I really liked it and I started to listening to all types of rappers.

The things that are most meaningful about rap really are that some of it talks about real stuff, but it also talks about their lives and crazy stuff. I think it's cool if you can make a good rap about real stuff, and make it lit at the same time. Alright, there are a lot of rappers I listen to and think are pretty good. People like J. Cole since he talks about real stuff about him, lil Yachty since he's more of a positive rapper, Logic because he's real, and Kendrick Lamar. I respect a bunch of the legends like lil Wayne, 2pac, Biggie, and others.

His narrative was a deeply educational experience for me. I spent the evening listening to artists he mentioned and finding so much evidence to support his claims about their significance. I was impressed to see him write about his own personal struggles with the genre given his parents' influences. What resonates with him in rap music is something that just is not accessible in so much of school music. I had to find a way to help him find his voice in music and make real connections to the music he loves.

### **Kyle and Xander**

The second marking period showed the impact of my first class's suggestions in surprising ways. Kyle and Xander are two eighth grade boys who

have noticeably different learning styles, but very similar taste in hip-hop music. When I explained the final project options to the class, I saw them trying to nonverbally communicate across the room with great enthusiasm. They both ran up to me the moment I dismissed class to talk to me about the project. In hip-hop music, it is very common for artists to feature other artists in songs. Kyle and Xander desperately wanted to do the same. My original intent for the project was for it to be an independent one, but I could not ignore their enthusiasm or how very relevant this request was. In accordance with my study, I honored my students' voices in hopes of seeing something remarkable happen. For the first time in this research project, my prediction was accurate.

From the moment I agreed to their teamwork, both boys rushed to my room from class and immediately began working on their project diligently. I gave them basic guidelines (writing a hook, having at least three distinct verses), but they were committed to making their song really shine. Over the course of the marking period, they learned to use the Garageband app on their cell phones to work with their recordings both inside and outside of the classroom in conjunction with their desktop computer. They learned to use the synthesizer as a MIDI controller and both create and edit their samples on Garageband. They taught themselves (and me!) how to apply autotune effects to their vocals by using fine controls in the program. They completed their song proudly after weeks of

focused class time and a few lunches eaten and worked through in my music lab. They were so focused and thorough that they had time and motivation to write and record a second one before the marking period was over.

As I reflected on their work, I was impressed by how much they were able to accomplish in such a short amount of time. They completed the piano techniques aspect of the curriculum and then directly applied it to the composition end. They integrated musical form, music technology, musicianship, and language arts to express themselves through original music that is genuine, artful, and inherently culturally responsive. Given the tools to create the music they love, the support to self-direct, and the space to explore, they were able to meet and exceed the standards in a way that intrinsically motivated them.

Xander reflected on his experience with this project in an informal interview.

**What final project did you choose and why?**

I chose the rap project because that's my favorite genre and I listen to it all the time.

**From where did you draw your inspiration for this project?**

Artists like A-Boogie. There's lots more, but that's the main one. My brother and his friends because they are making music.

**How do you feel about the finished product?**

I like it a lot. It turned out good. I like the hook- it sounds good with both of our voices going together. I liked switching up beats and trying to find the right one, and lyrics. We had to do a lot of research to find stuff that rhymes.

**Is this a project you feel all students should do as part of the music curriculum? Why or why not?**

Yes because it's fun and it can get you out of your comfort zone.

**Did you learn anything that you had not expected to?**

I learned about the structure of rap songs, how to use autotune on Garageband, and combining beats together to make one nice one.

I'll never forget how fun that class was for me, how they would run in the door with their phones in their hands anxious to share with me what they recorded the night before. How they would beg me to stay through lunch to finish recording a verse, or how the other students looked at them with envy because they dared to do something original. How their classmates were then inspired to create their own and ultimately did so successfully on quite a few occasions.

**Norani and Alice**

Norani and Alice are both high achieving 8th grade girls. They have studied music formally for five years, perform in the orchestra and the chorus, are experienced athletes, and are widely known by staff for their commitment to education. I never had a doubt that they would be successful in my class given

their experiences and work ethic, but I was particularly interested to see how they would handle a more open-ended assignment like the final project. The two seemed a little uncomfortable at first with the notion that there was no right or wrong answer in how to go about the project, but eagerly accepted the challenge to compose pop songs.

They followed my instructions to make songs independently, but after Kyle and Xander led the charge for pairing up, they quickly jumped at the chance to be partners. Both have such a strong musical background that I was not surprised in the least that they wanted to use their guitar and piano skills to accompany themselves in the song. They first composed the lyrics to the song, which was a heartbreaking call to a father who is absent in his daughter's life. Norani explains in her personal narrative:

Personally, I believe the genre of pop is defined as a way to express emotions in a way outside of violence and cruelty. Sometimes it is hard for people to express themselves verbally in a way that people will understand, but when they do it musically the words just come together so that it's easy to decipher. My earliest memory of pop music would have to have been when I was around 7 and my sister, Anna, introduced me to Demi Lovato. I had never experienced music so powerful before that day. I had an automatic connection with Demi Lovato's music. She wrote about

her insecurities and the worst moments in her life and she presented it to the world with full confidence. That's one thing that I love about pop music. When you're verbally explaining your problems or insecurities to someone it gets hard for you, but when you add music to it you feel more powerful, more in control that's why I feel so many people write pop songs.

The connections between her narrative and the recording of her final project were nothing short of profound. It is easy to see every music standard in her work, but I do not know what could have motivated her to write something so powerful more than the support and space to use her skills in a way that is very much her own.

Alice's narrative complimented Norani's feelings about pop music well:

What is pop to me? Well, pop is like a bunch of different stories all summed up into poems about people and their lives. How much sorrow they feel, the happiness they feel, the joy they share, the pain they bear, the people they hurt, the ones who treat them like dirt; they write about all of this and the thing that I love is that it's so relatable. You can relate to all their problems, because they're all ours too. We see this everyday, we live through this everyday, they just write about it and share with the world to let us know that we're not alone, we are not the only ones going through

the pain or even the happiness. There is someone out there who knows, who understands and the music may be the only thing pushing someone through to believe there is an outcome, there is a better place, there is a hope. Pop does that for me along with a whole bunch of different genres, but pop pulls me through, makes me see the bright in the day, allows me to have hope and give hope.

I was especially interested to read about Alice's experiences with pop music, given what she had shared with me regarding cultural incongruencies she noticed in the classroom. Alice was born in east Africa and moved to the United States when she was very young. She explained an interview where she was painfully aware of cultural incongruence among her peers. "With White and Hispanic students, they often speak or sing in Spanish. They talk about visiting each other's houses, going out to eat, eating specific types of food, etc. I don't have these types of experiences in my family." She added, "When we did a project on the Dominican Republic, I pronounced a word wrong and felt embarrassed because all of the other students expected me to know how to say it." I found her perspective powerful. Students feel cultural incongruence in both the curriculum and peer interactions through the learning process.

Alice continued on to describe her perception of teacher and peer interactions regarding her culture. "People make harsh assumptions about Africa.

*Do you have houses? Do you have clothes?* People make assumptions about you when you're a black student- if you don't prove yourself, they assume you aren't intelligent." This prompted us to have a conversation about cultural assumptions in curriculum. We agreed in a class discussion that music can be powerful or dangerous when it comes to cultural identity as long as "the teacher doesn't make the assumption. The student should be allowed to show their own identity when they're comfortable." I was happy to see that her choice of the pop music project allowed her to shape her own musical identity and express herself in a way that she found most meaningful.

While these young ladies have always met all of the requirements of my courses, it was beautiful to see them work together to create something that was deeply meaningful to them. I enjoyed watching them work through chord progressions on the guitar and arranging the piano part. They applied their musical skills from two of my courses and combined it with language arts to write and record a rather impressive piece of pop music.

My classroom made a complete shift over the course of the two marking periods to a very constructivist environment. Instead of direct instruction followed by practice, students were learning in a way that is better described as a lab or workshop than a traditional music classroom. There was always a hum of "noise," but a closer listen would reveal much more. My students were

discussing their own best practices for piano technique. They were sharing articles about how to create different effects on voices and instruments in Garageband. They were listening to and responding to each other's original works. They were featuring each other on their compositions. They were asking to work through lunch, to come in early, and to stay after school to keep working on their projects.

## Data Analysis

The National Association for Music Education outlines universal music skills within their standards under the umbrellas of *creating*, *performing*, *responding*, and *connecting* (NAfME 2015). I collected data throughout my study to see if students were reaching these standards more efficiently when they learned through a curriculum built upon culturally responsive music. I used surveys to gather information about building a culturally responsive curriculum and monitored its success through student work and follow-up interviews.

***Pre-Course Surveys.*** At the beginning of each marking period, I used a survey to help me gauge my students' perceptions of music class and their experiences with music outside of school.

Figure 1 shows the ratings of experience they had in studying/ performing music prior to the course. Student experience varied greatly between marking periods, which meant that I had to be creative in differentiated instruction so that my experienced students were enriched and my inexperienced students were supported. I explained in the survey that a 0 meant they had no experience with music other than what they learned in the classroom. The other ratings were for their number of experiences such as church choir, band, orchestra, choir, guitar lessons, piano lessons, voice lessons, etc.

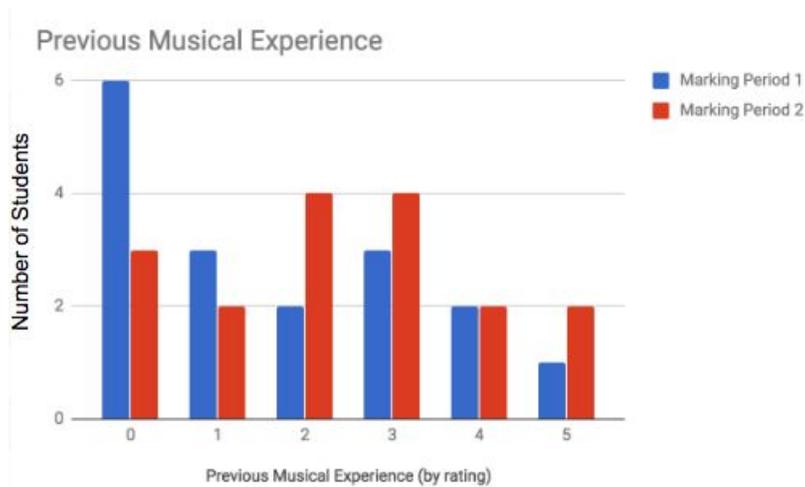


Figure 1. *Students' Previous Musical Experience*

The next question the survey asked students to rate their anxiety associated with the course. Figure 2 shows student anxiety associated with the course prior to beginning. I found that most students were not experiencing particularly high levels of anxiety about the class, but were concerned that it may have little connection to their own musical experiences or interests. Students who rated their anxiety at 0 expressed no anxiety about music class. Those who rated a 5 expressed a significant amount of anxiety about aspects of the class. In class discussions, they explained they were worried about learning to read music, having enough time to practice, and being creative enough.

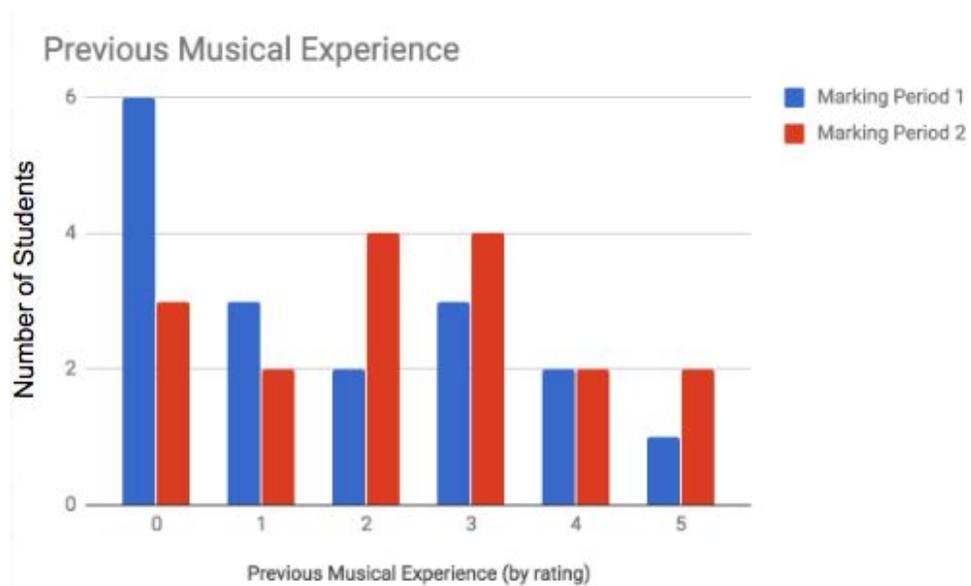


Figure 2. *Anxiety Associated with Music Class*

I also wanted to gauge their enthusiasm about general music. Figure 3 shows ratings of student excitement prior to beginning the course. I looked at students' ratings of excitement and anxiety in tandem with their responses about songs they wanted to learn. I noticed that students with higher degrees of excitement had more specific answers to what songs they hoped to learn. Students with higher ratings of anxiety were more often left blank or had responses of "I don't know." Regardless of enthusiasm and anxiety, students mentioned that they were most interested in learning about music through a popular music lens: learning to perform their music, to write their own music,

and to talk about their music. They also expressed during class discussions worries about their music being inappropriate for the classroom and were not sure how it would fit with a conventional general music classroom.

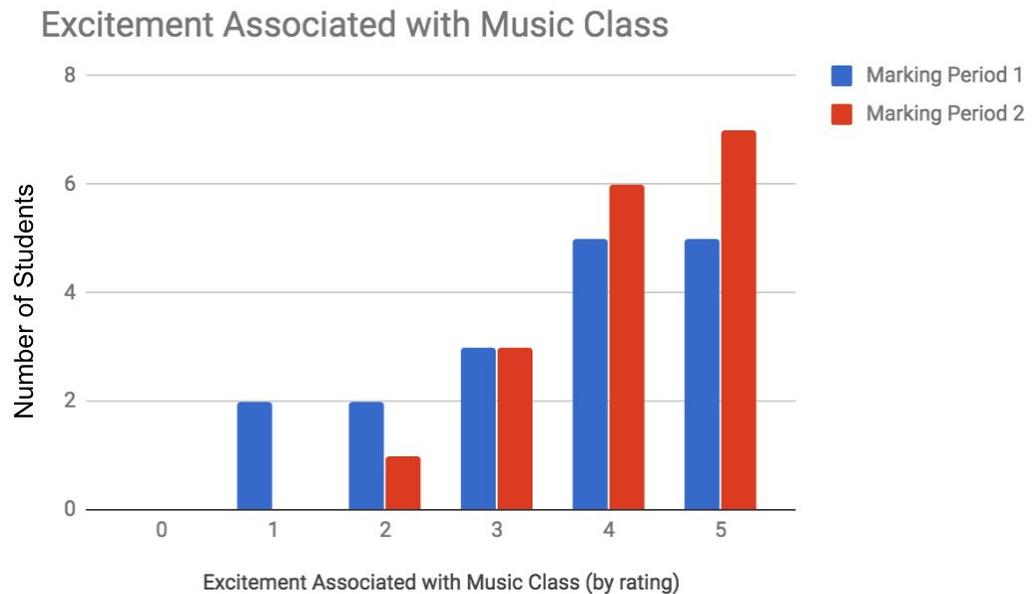


Figure 3. *Excitement Associated with Music Class*

Over the course of two marking periods, both classes of students agreed about their perceptions, but would find different ways to integrate their musical worlds with state and national standards and the community built among their peers. Some helped me create the new composition final projects, others integrated prior music knowledge to record themselves playing their band and orchestra instruments, many made it to their choice piano song and selected a

favorite to learn during class, while others still used hip-hop techniques to compose, record, and analyze final projects.

*Home Music Survey.* To collect information about students' home music, I issued a simple survey that asked students to list songs and styles of music that they have heard frequently throughout their lives at home and in the community. I found that songs used for learning were the same across the board: the Alphabet Song, Old MacDonald, Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed, etc. These songs were used primarily in their elementary education, but were bridged into my students' homes regardless of culture and home language. Celebratory songs were also fairly consistent: Jingle Bells, Happy Birthday, etc. When I inquired about this, my students (many of whom attended the same two elementary schools) explained that even their parents learned this music during their primary education. The most significant range of responses showed up in preferred songs and artists that students listen to now. While they were nearly all found within the popular music and hip-hop genres, they ranged in style, language, and eras. This range also occurred when students were asked about the music preferences of their parents and their peers.

*Parent & Community Home Music Survey.* Involving the community is an integral aspect of my action research. I took Back to School Night and parent/teacher conferences as an opportunity to directly involve my students'

families and community members in my data collection. I printed out copies of the survey (see Appendix E) and distributed them to parents as they entered the building for both events. I used this survey to learn about home language, culture, and musical experiences from adult perspectives. The data completely mirrored my students' perceptions from their own home music survey.

***Student Work.*** Once I began to sculpt the curriculum, my students' work became the most important data collection of the study. Under the artistic process of *creating*, my classes engaged in composition assignments in various styles (based on their own preferences and choices) using varied techniques (performance on instruments, composition using loops and samples, MIDI composition). They engaged in the process of *performing* by studying piano techniques through the performance of familiar tunes from their childhood that ultimately culminated in a "choice song" assignment where they applied their new skills to any song of their choice. The process of *responding* took place through personal narratives about their favorite genre of music and analyses of their favorite songs in the context of form and structure. The final process of *connecting* was visible in students' integration of personal preferences in music and their own song-writing.

***Student Interviews.*** It was through the student interviews that I learned the most about what my students were looking for in a culturally responsive

music classroom. My students illustrated the stark differences between their musical experiences outside of school and the seemingly unrelated concepts they were expected to learn in the classroom. By having open conversations with them about this issue, they were able to articulate what musical goals were most meaningful to them and how I could help them achieve those through restructuring my instruction. It led directly to the development of the form projects, the student choice piano song, the choice song analysis, and the final project options (Pop Song Composition, Hip-Hop Song Composition, and Film Score Project).

***Post-Course Reflection Survey.*** At the end of each marking period, I asked my students to complete one last survey (see Appendix G) so that I could see if their perceptions of the course changed over the nine weeks. I asked them for five ratings about the course first, followed by open-ended questions about what aspects of the course they want me to keep and recommendations for what aspects should be changed.

Figure 4 shows the final perceptions of school music from each of my classes through a rating system. In responding to the prompt, *did you feel that what you learned in this class was useful outside of the classroom*, students rated the perception on a scale from 0-5, 0 = Not At All, 3 = Somewhat, 5 = Very Much.

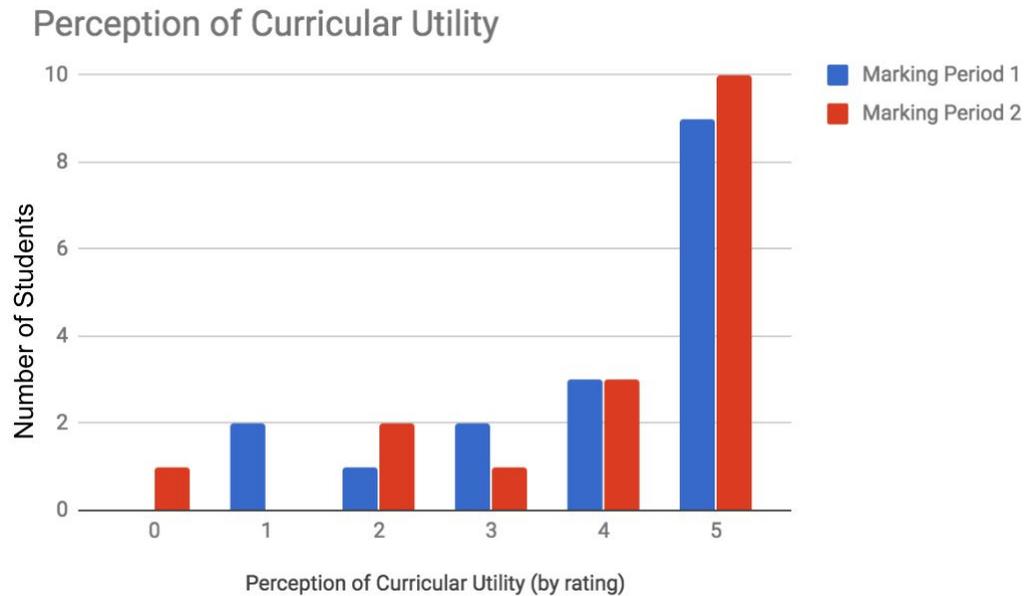


Figure 4. *Perception of Curricular Utility*

Students went on to rate the major components of the course as they pertained to their own interests, 0 = Not Interesting, 3 = Somewhat Interesting, 5 = Very interesting. Figures 5-7 show student interest ratings on Piano, Song Form, and the Film Score Project. The range of these responses did not show any specific patterns over the course of two marking periods. The only trend I noticed was that the first marking period preferred the original content, likely because they didn't have the option of doing the self-directed choice projects like the second group.

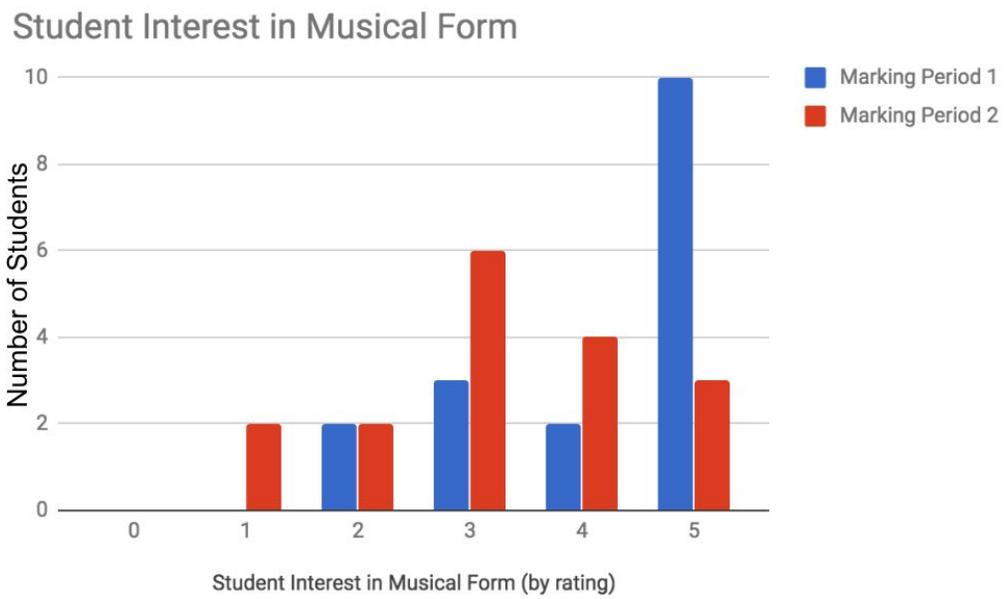


Figure 5. *Student Interest in Piano*

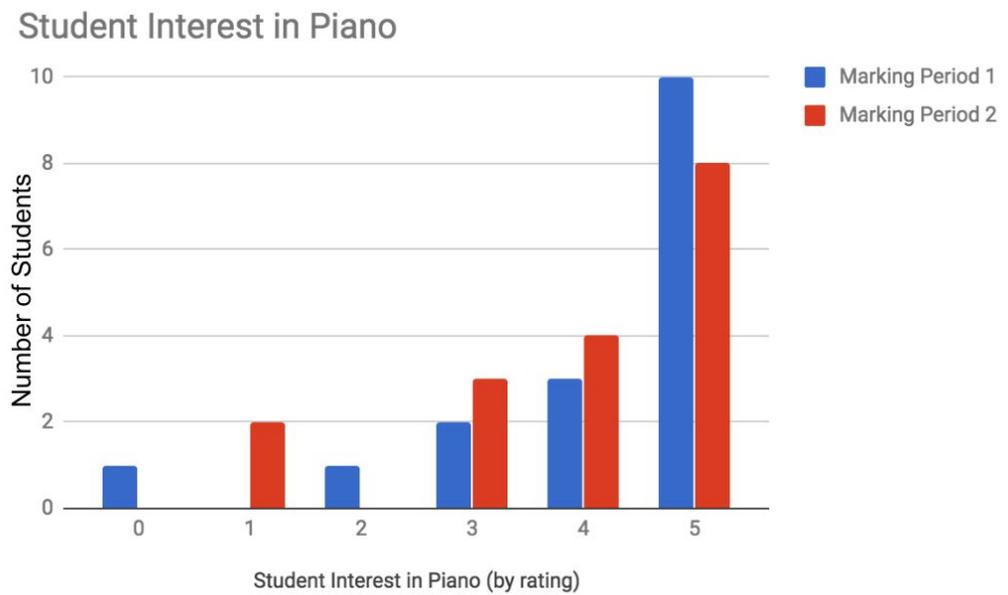
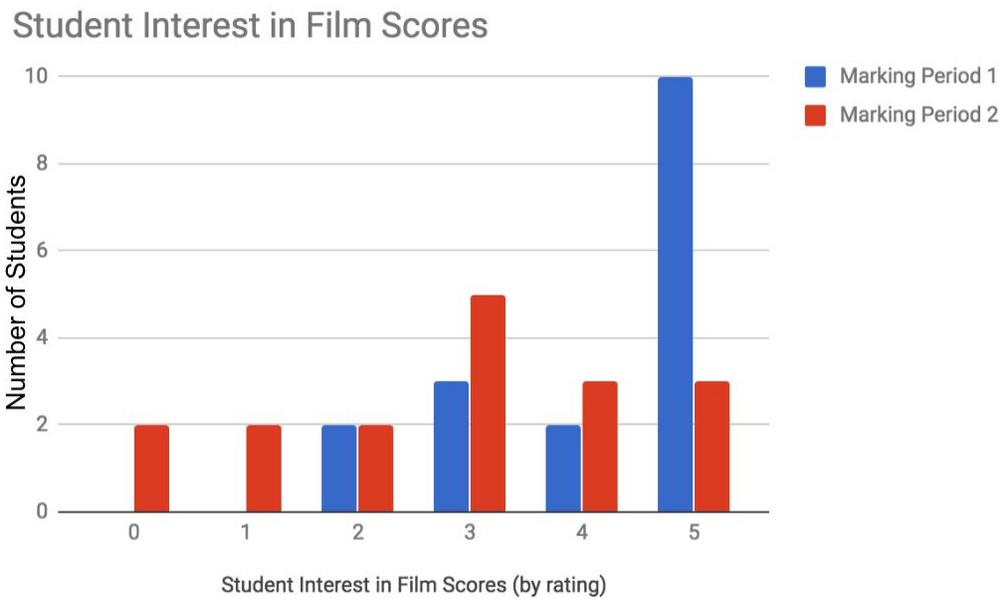


Figure 6. *Student Interest in Musical Form*



*Figure 7. Student Interest in Film Scores*

After rating their interest in the original aspects of the class, they were prompted to list aspects of the course that should be kept and suggestions for change in the future. Figure 8 shows this breakdown for the first marking period under the original curriculum and Figure 9 shows the same for the second marking period under the revised culturally responsive curriculum.

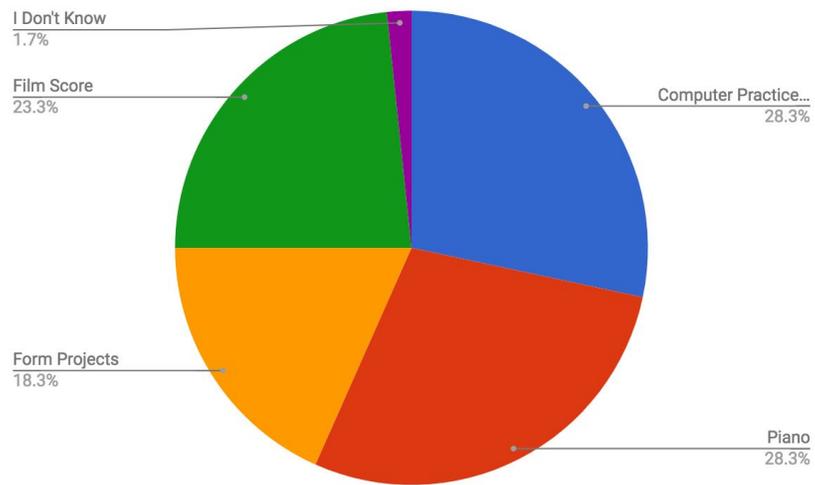


Figure 8. *Student Feedback: Aspects of the Curriculum to Keep (MP 1)*

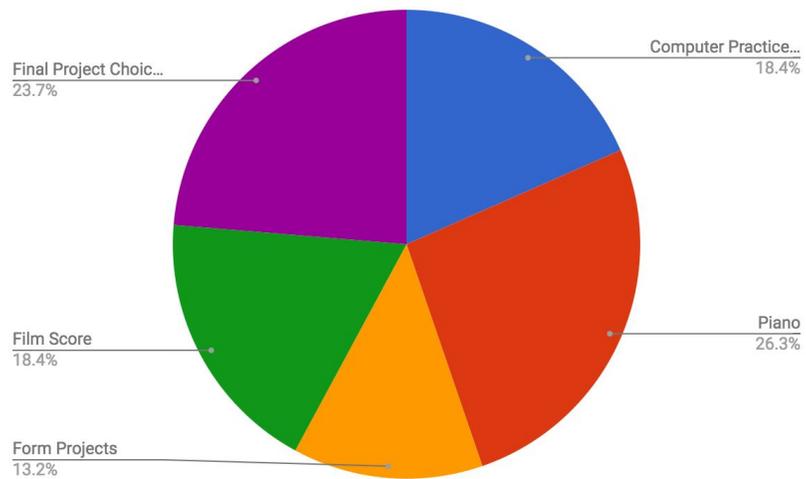


Figure 9. *Student Feedback: Aspects of the Curriculum to Keep (MP 2)*

I realized from this data that students connected the pieces of instruction into one more cohesive concept, rather than having particular interests in one specific aspect of the course. 10 out of the 17 students surveyed listed all of the above as what should be maintained as a part of the course in the future.

The information collected from this data led to the discovery of important themes in the study. I coded the data and organized them into the following bins in order to further organize my findings which can be found in Figure 10.

<b>Research Question:</b>				
How does a foundation of culturally relevant music (pop, hip-hop, culturally diverse) in the general music curriculum affect engagement and the acquisition of universal music skills for middle school students?				
<b>Student Diversity</b>	<b>Community Input</b>	<b>Universal Music Skills</b>	<b>Authenticity</b>	<b>Engagement</b>
Linguistic Diversity	Church /Religion	Connecting Standards with Student Experiences and Interests	Direct Resources	Student-Centered
Cultural Diversity	Culture & Heritage		Current Resources & Methods	Culturally Relevant
Instructional Differentiation	Home Music Influences		Student-Centered	Composition Performance

Figure 10. *Coding Index Graphic Organizer*

## Research Findings

I conducted this study to observe the impact of a culturally responsive curriculum in the middle school general music classroom. My intention was to develop a curriculum with my students so that they would feel represented in and connected to the course while meeting state and national standards thoroughly and efficiently. The music classroom has incredible potential to be an engaging, validating, and progressive avenue of education. In order to stay current, I needed to directly involve my students in the creative process. I was fortunate to have the full, enthusiastic support of my students, their families, and my administration throughout the course of the study. Our collective work in this action research project had a clear impact on how my students learned and used their skills in my classroom.

Three significant themes emerged from this research. Echoed in the literature review, my field log observations, data collection, and data analysis, these themes are powerful representations of progress made by all involved in the study.

In order for a curriculum to be **culturally responsive**, the teacher must be aware of and honor student diversity. Culturally and linguistically diverse students bring a wide array of prior knowledge to the classroom, which the teacher can leverage to help students of varied backgrounds access a rich and

vibrant curriculum in which students see themselves reflected.

Data from the home music survey shows how 82 surveyed families described their national heritage in Figure 11. These survey results show my students' family heritage and give insight into their prior knowledge associated with their home cultures. With such a variety of responses, I realized that my work would be less about me teaching my students about their own music based on their home culture, but rather creating opportunities for them to teach me and each other about what they know and love.

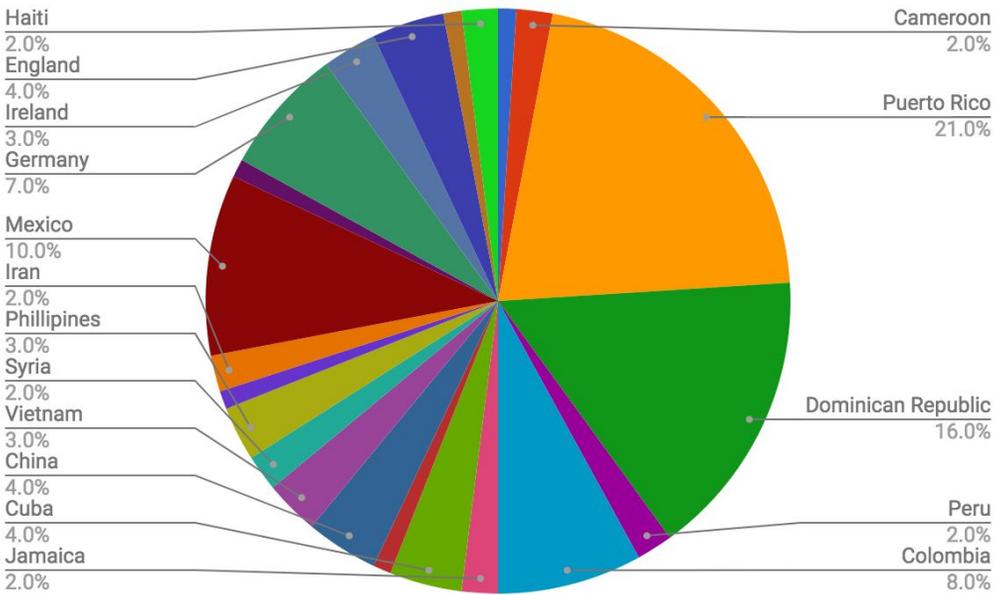


Figure 11. *Parent Descriptions of Heritage by Nationality*

I thought back to the stories my students' told me in their interviews. I was reminded of Alice's story and the assumptions that teachers and students made about her based on her proud African heritage. While she and her family carry many of their belief systems and customs from their country, she has developed an identity all her own as she has grown up in America. She is perfectly comfortable talking about her heritage, but prefers to express herself in ways that are not confined to cultural assumptions. She loves singing and playing guitar and has a particular passion for pop music. It is through playing the cello or writing lyrics and accompanying herself on guitar that she finds value and relevance in music.

This experience illustrated why multicultural education alone can be problematic. While I wanted to honor all of my students' cultures, it was also important for me to give them the space and the forum to share those aspects with which they were comfortable while also affording them the opportunity to interact with and learn about their peers'.

In order to do this, I interviewed students about what they wanted me to do to make class connect with their home music experiences more effectively. I reached out to students' families to find out what musical experiences students were having outside of school. I had to find opportunities for students to choose

an avenue that made the most sense to them. It was through these processes that I developed the Choice Song Analysis, where students applied the concept of finding form structures in music to their own favorite song. I also changed the final project from the Film Score Project to three separate options: Hip-Hop Songwriting, Pop Songwriting, or the original Film Score Project. The umbrellas of Hip-Hop and Pop were big enough that students were able to incorporate any genre they desired into their project. They were able to combine original lyrics with skills they acquired on guitar and piano and/or recording technology and create something inherently their own. Students uncomfortable with the vulnerability associated with writing and recording on original song then had the option of working on the more highly structured film score project, which still had numerous opportunities for creative risk-taking and employment of newly acquired music skills.

Culturally responsive music education starts with the student. With increasing diversity in American schools, we are not presented with so much of an obstacle, but a wealth of knowledge, experience, and expertise within the student body. As teachers, we are called, instead of teaching to students about their culture and interests, to, rather, create opportunities for students to use their prior knowledge to share, enlighten, and connect with the school community.

**Standardized music skills** are outlined in state and national standards as those skills all students in America should obtain in their public education and include the fundamental artistic processes of listening to, creating, and responding to music. Students obtain these skills significantly faster through a culturally responsive approach that intrinsically motivates them to learn and employ their skills beyond the isolation of the classroom.

Using a competency-based grading system, I tracked students' progress over the course of the marking period. Every time a student could demonstrate the acquisition of a new skill (reading rhythmic notation, reading treble clef notation, playing in C Position, composing in Garageband using loops, etc.), they received full credit for that competency. Each competency was aligned with state and national standards and was ordered in three lists labeled Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. Figure 12 shows the change in students' final competency ratings from Marking Period 1 to Marking Period 2. It is important to note in these competency ratings that those in Marking Period 2 who scored Proficient, scored an average of 2% higher than their peers who also scored Proficient in the first marking period. The class average for Marking Period 2 was also 2% higher than Marking Period 1. There appears to be a correlation between the curriculum changes from Marking Period 1 to Marking Period 2 and the acquisition of skills through the competency-based grading system.

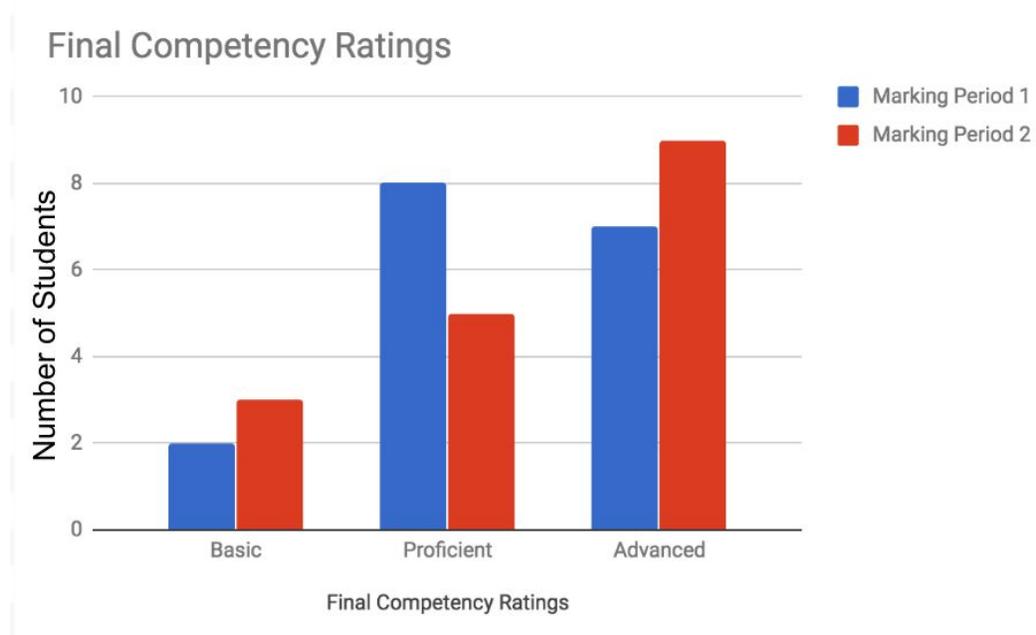


Figure 12. *Final Competency Ratings*

My students were not shy in giving feedback about music class. Through surveys and interviews, they told me they felt as though they were learning content that was only useful to them while they were in class. As a music educator, I understood that the skills outlined in the state and national standards were readily applicable to my students' interests, I just had to find more effective ways for my students to connect them.

I felt particularly aligned with Kruse's (2016) hip-hop pedagogy. I had to rethink the rules that govern music and find creative ways to help students make connections with the seemingly isolated skills with the bigger picture- their

personal interests and goals. I once again had to think about McNiff's (2013) premise: "‘I change me’ not ‘I change you’" (p. 11).

While I was surprised to find that the songs I had been using for the piano techniques aspect of the course were more relevant than I had expected, I knew I still had work to do in helping students stay motivated through the process of learning a new instrument. Surveying students on their favorite music seemed at first like an over-complicated endeavour, I hadn't seen the same favorite song twice. Instead of trying to find trends in their suggestions, I realized that the solution was much more simple: I had to allow them to choose the song they were going to learn. By selecting their end-game, they were more motivated to acquire the standardized skills necessary to perform their selected song, thus meeting standards more efficiently.

Printed sheet music of their selected song was more than enough to motivate them to learn about the components of musical literacy and piano techniques. Seeing the same notation and symbols in the sheet music of their favorite songs helped them make the immediate connection to the simple melodies and basic grand staff songs they had to work through first. Because of this choice, 41% of the second marking period class was able to learn a song of their choice before the end of the course.

There is significantly more room for improvement, but it appears that

students moved more quickly through the basics of music literacy, skills outlined by state and national standards, when they could see a relevant application of the course material.

**Student engagement** is visible in a student-centered, culturally responsive classroom in the student work, particularly in performance-based assessments and creative work (such as composition) that demands a superior command of the intricate rules and structures that govern music in any context. It happens in the classroom and outside of the school day when students actively involve themselves in school and community music programs or engage in the consumption or creation of music independently. It could be as complex as learning a new instrument and participating in a performing ensemble or as simple as being an active, informed audience participant or consumer of musical media. As I learned more about my students' interests through interviews and surveys, I became better equipped at connecting them to music in and outside of my classroom.

As far as classroom engagement is concerned, I recorded numerous examples. Kyle and Xander brought their lunches to the music lab so they could continue working on their final projects through lunch. Alice and Norani came to school early and stayed after school to write and record their song together. One student asked to do multiple choice song analyses so he could compare his

favorite genres. Others requested sheet music to two or three songs so they could learn more during their time in class.

Outside of the classroom saw more engagement that stemmed from my class. One student learned a song that she later performed at her church. Two students chose songs in class to prepare for a performance at a local senior center with the choir. Two students went on to join performing ensembles in the school and another found herself playing a piano solo for the jazz band. Some students have connections to recording studios and asked to take their projects home to work on them with their family and friends. Many other students learned how to use the Garageband app on their iPhone and continued to write and record music on their own with it.

Honoring my students' voices and giving them options as to how they would both demonstrate understanding and ultimately be creative in a way that is most meaningful had the greatest impact on student learning in my classroom. Student voice and student choice was central to constructing this study and resonated with students most loudly. It all connected to Kimberly Weins' (2015) thoughts on student-driven learning, with students being the experts on how they learn best. My classes were ultimately able to use the tools I gave them to engage in music and be creative in ways that best represented each of them individually.

## Next Steps

I never had trouble accepting my role as a lifelong learner. Although I've been a teacher for only eight years, I've seen enough shifts in the educational paradigm to know that it is my duty to actively keep up and evolve with it. Prior to this study, I felt as though I was doing a good job of it. I realized very quickly, however, that I still, and always will, have very much to learn. I'm fortunate to have students in my classroom every year that are willing to keep teaching me.

John Dewey (1938) said:

If the pupil...engaged in a physical truancy, or in the mental truancy of mind-wandering and finally built up an emotional revulsion against the subject, he was held to be at fault. No question was raised as to whether the trouble might not lie in the subject-matter or in the way in which it was offered. The principle of interaction makes it clear that failure of adaptation of material to needs and capacities of individuals may cause an experience to be non-educative quite as much as failure of an individual to adapt himself to the material (pp. 46-47).

As I reflect on this study, I see the full weight of my responsibility to be a culturally responsive teacher for my students. It is my duty to evolve my curriculum and instruction and involve my students directly throughout these

processes. They are true experts of culture and have a far more superior command of their musical experiences than I will. To honor that and take on the position of facilitator, to put the students at the center of their own educational experiences, and to allow myself to be the student too is a profound joy. While my role in the classroom is significantly more complex since this study, it is also significantly more rewarding.

Moving forward, I realize that there is much more work to do... and there always will be. I intend to engage in a continuous feedback loop with my students so that we are always working together to reflect upon and assess the curriculum and instructional strategies in the course. I want to continue to empower my students to celebrate their culture and express themselves through music in ways that are most meaningful and artful. I have not accepted that this study has ended and will employ these strategies consistently to strengthen our learning community for the rest of my career.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A: HSIRB Proposal

HUMAN SUBJECTS INTERNAL REVIEW BOARD (HSIRB) PROPOSAL FORM  
Moravian College v. 09-01-13

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**Questions: contact**

Dr. Sarah Johnson, Chair HSIRB  
Department of Psychology  
skjohnson@moravian.edu  
(610) 625-7013

#### Part I: RESEARCHER

1. Proposer: <b>Amy L. Putlock</b>	2. Department: <b>Education</b>
3. Mailing address: [REDACTED]	4. Phone: [REDACTED]
5. E-mail address: <b>aputlock@basdschools.org</b>	
6. This is a (please check): <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Proposal <input type="checkbox"/> Resubmission of a rejected Proposal <input type="checkbox"/> Renewal <input type="checkbox"/> Request for modification	7. Research Start/End Dates: Make sure you clearly define the start and end dates. Format as month, day, year. <b>Start: August 28, 2017</b> <b>End: January 24, 2018</b>
7. Title of Proposal: Rethinking General Music in the Urban Middle School Classroom	
8. Faculty Advisor: Dr. Tristan Gleason	

#### Part II: PROPOSAL TYPE

1. This research involves **ONLY** the use of **educational tests** (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude or achievement).

Yes  
 No

2. This research collects interviews or surveys **ONLY** of **elected or appointed public officials** or candidates for such.

Yes  
 No

3. This research involves **ONLY** observations of **public behavior**.

Yes  
 No

4. This research involves **ONLY** existing data, documents, records or specimens.

Yes  
 No

5. List the **research funding sources**, if any.

N/A

6. The results of this research will be published.

Yes  
 No  
 Uncertain

If you marked “yes” or “uncertain”, please provide a brief description of the possible forum of publication (for example, peer-reviewed journal, conference presentation, etc.)

Description of publication forum:

Master’s theses will be published on Moravian College’s website.

*In this next section, you will provide extensive details about the research project. Please make sure that your explanations/descriptions are clearly written and grammatically correct so that the committee can accurately follow and assess your proposal.*

### Part III. DETAILS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

1. In this section, you have the option of either addressing each of the following subheadings individually or together (since there may be some overlap) in your proposal narrative. If providing a narrative, please make sure that each of the following topics is clearly identified in the narrative.

a. **Objectives:**

1. To observe and analyze the impact of a culturally relevant music curriculum on the acquisition of universal musical skills (national and state standards aligned) in competency-based grading (check-list style).
2. To observe and analyze the impact of student input in curriculum on engagement and achievement in the music classroom.

b. **Design:**

Using a home music survey, gather data on what students and their families find to be culturally relevant, meaningful, and familiar music. Use this data to gather resources to be used in the classroom for instructional purposes. Conduct musical analyses on resources to sort music by specific instructional purpose (rhythm, melody, composition, reading/writing notation, etc.). Using this curriculum specifically tailored to my students, I will measure their skill acquisition rates and survey them regarding engagement and relevance.

c. **Procedures (makes sure you clearly describe what is required of subjects):**

1. Students will complete Home Music Survey to the extent they feel comfortable.
2. I will use data collected from this survey to build unit and lesson plans that are standards aligned.
3. Students will participate in lessons that consider cultural identity, interests, familiarity of music, and current popular music trends as a foundation.
4. I will analyze music skill acquisition throughout the unit through formative and summative assessments: analysis, performance, and composition.
5. Students will complete two surveys on perception, engagement, and interest through Google Forms which will immediately be coded with student names removed.

d. **Outline procedures/steps to reduce risks to subjects:**

1. Student anonymity will be honored through use of pseudonyms when discussing specific situations.
  2. Regardless of resources used, the curriculum will be aligned with state and national standards for music education.
2. This research involves the following GROUP(S) vulnerable to risk. Check all that apply.

- |                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Subjects under the age of 18  |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Prisoners   |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Pregnant women  |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | People with mental, cognitive, intellectual, or physical disabilities |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Volunteer sample so vulnerable group membership may be unknown        |

**Research Design Note:** If you are asking for **volunteer participants**, you will not necessarily know whether or not your participants are under 18, pregnant and/or disabled. In fact, your volunteers may themselves not know whether they fall into one of these categories. Therefore, if you are asking for volunteer participants, you need to think carefully about whether or not your research project could adversely affect someone in any of these categories, and if so, how you might try to either screen out these individuals and/or design the project so that the risk to these individuals is minimized.

2a. If you checked any or all of the groups identified above, explain why you need to use the group and the methods you will use to minimize risk. If your research design proposes no special risks to these vulnerable individuals even if they happen to be included in your sample, please state why:

Children ages 10-15 represent my student population. My research design does not propose any special risks to these vulnerable individuals. The nature of the project means adjusting resources, materials, and performances within the classroom that are representative of my students' cultures.

3. This research might affect people with special vulnerabilities (for example, pregnant women, people with allergies, people taking some medications, people with cognitive impairments such as ADHD, etc.)

**Research Design Note:** Think carefully here again about whether or not your research design could negatively affect people with special vulnerabilities. For example, does your research design require so much concentration and/or computation that it might result in considerable stress for someone with a cognitive impairment? Are people completing your instrument in solitude or in a group setting? Might comparative performance result in excessive stress?

Yes  
 No

If you checked "Yes", explain the methods you will use to minimize risk to these people.

4. Describe your subject pool including:  
a. the intended number of subjects  
b. subject characteristics/demographics

a. 25-30 students  
b. students ages 10-15 from majority Latino (Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Honduras, Argentina, etc.) and Black (African American, Jamaican, African) backgrounds.

5. Describe in detail the methods you will use to recruit your subjects.  
Subjects will be comprised of my eighth grade general music class.

6. This research involves **deception** of subjects.

Yes  
 No

If you checked "Yes", describe the nature of the deception and your debriefing procedure. You will need to provide the debriefing statement with the full proposal submission. Even if the debriefing will be done orally, you need to submit the text of the verbal statement that will be read to participants.

7. Explain by whom and how the subjects will be informed of the purposes of this research project. (*Remember to provide a copy of the informed consent form with this proposal form.*)

Collecting data about home cultures will be part of the classroom experience and they will be encouraged to share their previous music experiences (lullabies, celebratory songs, learning songs, etc.) so that they can be used as class material.

8. This research collects information, which (check all that apply)

- deals with **sensitive aspects** from the participant's point of view.
- identifies the subject by **name or number codes**.
- might place the subject at **risk of liability** if made public.
- might place the subject's **financial standing or employability** at risk if made public.

**Research Design Note:** *Think carefully about whether or not your research deals with topics that may be sensitive from the participant's point of view. Sometimes it is not obvious to the researcher that the subject of their research may be a sensitive topic for others.*

If you checked any or all of the categories above, explain the methods you will use to

- a. safeguard the data you collect (you need to describe this safeguarding procedure in detail, including but not limited to a description of how the data will be protected (for example, in a locked cabinet), whom will have access to the data, and how and when the data will be destroyed)
  - b. inform subjects of available support services (If your participants are drawn from the Moravian College community, please provide contact information for the Counseling Center, Campus Safety and the Health Center—contact information available on the HSIRB website. For participants drawn from other communities, please provide the comparable support service information.)
  - c. minimize the risk of identification of subjects.
- 
- a. I will safeguard the data by keeping it in a file on my personal computer and in a three-ring binder that will be kept in a locked drawer of my locked office. Only I will have access to this data during the research and it will then be presented with coded names in my research project.
  - b. The students will be informed of access to the guidance counselor's office, the Fowler Family Center (located on campus), and the nurse's suite- although the nature of this project will not likely require their use.
  - c. Student data will be kept using alphanumerical codes that allow me to identify students easily, but keep students identities anonymous. From that point, I will use pseudonyms to present the research.

## Appendix B: Parent Consent Form

August, 2017

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I would like to invite your child to be a part of my graduate action research in developing a culturally relevant curriculum in my General Music classes. I am conducting this research to better serve my students by actively honoring culture and specific interests. It is your choice to allow your child to participate.

Over the course of this study, your child will be asked to complete a home music survey, participate in class as usual, and answer short, anonymous interview questions throughout the marking period. All aspects of their participation can be completed during class time and will require no time out of the school day.

All students will be taking part in classroom activities regardless of their choice to allow me to use their data in my study. My research is based on the implementation of a particular style of curriculum development and teaching that all of my students will be experiencing this school year.

When I complete my action research, it will be published to Moravian College's website so I can share what I've learned. This publication will not include your child's name and all of the data collected from them will remain anonymous. Raw data will be kept in a secure, locked location and only I will have access to it.

You and your child may choose to stop participating at any time with a brief written withdrawal (note or e-mail) with your child's name and your signature.

Should you have any questions about this project you or a parent may contact me, [REDACTED] (building principal) [REDACTED], or Dr. Joseph Shosh (Moravian College professor) at [jshosh@moravian.edu](mailto:jshosh@moravian.edu).

Please sign and date below if you decide to allow your child to participate in my action research.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, allow my child, \_\_\_\_\_, to participate in Miss Putlock's action research project on culturally relevant music curriculum.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.  
Musically,

Amy L. Putlock

General Music  
[REDACTED]

## Appendix C: Student Assent Form

August, 2017

Dear 8th Grade Music Student,

I will be conducting an action research study during Marking Period 2 of the 2017-18 school year in my 8th grade General Music classes. This study is to help me learn how to make my classes more fun, engaging, and meaningful. Your participation in this study would be incredibly helpful in getting the most meaningful results. If you choose to be a part of it, you will be asked to complete a survey at the beginning of the class, participate in classes like you usually would, and answer short, anonymous interview questions throughout the study.

All students will be taking part in classroom activities regardless of their choice to allow me to use their data in my study. My research is based on the implementation of a particular style of curriculum development and teaching that all of my students will be experiencing this school year.

When I complete my action research, it will be published to Moravian College's website so I can share what I've learned. This publication will not include your name and all of the data collected from you will remain anonymous.

You are not required to participate in my action research. You are also allowed to change your mind about participation after the research begins and withdraw at any time.

Should you have any questions about this project you or a parent may contact me, [REDACTED] (building principal) [REDACTED], or Dr. Joseph Shosh (Moravian College professor) at [jshosh@moravian.edu](mailto:jshosh@moravian.edu).

If you want to be a part of my action research project, please print and sign your name below.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, want to be a part of Miss Putlock's action research study on creating a culturally relevant music curriculum.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Musically,

Amy L. Putlock

General Music  
[REDACTED]

## Appendix D: Pre-Class Survey

### Pre-Class Survey

Tell me what's going on in that beautiful mind of yours before we start diving into the fun stuff (MUSIC)!

Rate your experience with studying/performing music (singing in church, taking lessons, band, chorus, etc.)

0 1 2 3 4 5

No experience.       I'm making music every day!

Rate your anxiety associated with music class this year.

0 1 2 3 4 5

I'm not nervous at all!       I'm pretty sure I'm going to fail this class.

Rate your excitement about music class this year.

0 1 2 3 4 5

I wish I didn't have to take this class.       WHY AREN'T WE PLAYING AN INSTRUMENT RIGHT NOW?!

Tell me one song you want to learn to play on the instrument you're learning this year.

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Tell me one thing that makes you nervous about class this year (if anything).

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

What instrument is your class learning this year?

- Recorder
- Guitar
- Piano

**SUBMIT**

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

## Appendix E: Home Music Survey

# Home Music Survey

Broughal Middle School Music

<b>What language(s) do you speak with your family?</b>
<b>How would you describe your heritage (from what countries did your ancestors come)?</b>
<b>What lullabies were sung to you/your siblings when you were younger? What lullabies are sung in your home?</b>
<b>What songs were you taught to learn certain things when you were younger? (Alphabet, animals, colors, numbers/counting, shapes, calendar, etc.)</b>
<b>What songs are used for celebration in your family? (Birthdays, weddings, graduation, holidays, etc.)</b>
<b>List Folk Songs and Popular Music that are played frequently in your home.</b>
<b>What do you hope to see your children learn from school music classes?</b>

## Appendix F: Favorite Music Survey

### Favorite Music

Tell me about this music in YOUR life!

What was your FAVORITE song when you were in elementary school? (please include song title and artist)

Your answer

---

What is your FAVORITE song now? (please include song title and artist)

Your answer

---

Name TWO songs you know your parents enjoy listening to. (please include song titles and artists)

Your answer

---

Name TWO songs you know your siblings OR classmates enjoy listening to. (please include song titles and artists)

Your answer

---

**SUBMIT**

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

## Appendix G: Course Reflection Survey

### General Music Reflection

Did you feel that what you learned in this class is useful outside of this classroom?

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at All	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely Useful					

Did what you learn in this class reflect your musical interests outside of school?

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at All	<input type="radio"/>	Accurate Reflection					

Please rate your interest in Piano.

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Not Interesting	<input type="radio"/>	Very Interesting					

Please rate your interest in Song Forms (Binary, Ternary, Rondo, etc.)

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Not Interesting	<input type="radio"/>	Very Interesting					

Please rate your interest in Film Scoring.

	0	1	2	3	4	5	
Not Interesting	<input type="radio"/>	Very Interesting					

Please describe the aspects of class Miss Putlock should KEEP for future classes (Piano, Song Forms, Film Scores, Computer Practice Games, etc.)

Your answer

Please describe the aspects of class Miss Putlock should CHANGE for future classes. Please also offer suggestions of what you would do differently!

Your answer

**SUBMIT**

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

## Appendix H: Original Pre-Course Survey

### General Music Survey

Respond to the following questions honestly to help Miss Putlock understand your perception of music.

**What purpose does music serve for you outside of school?**

Your answer

**What purpose does music serve for you in school?**

Your answer

**In what ways are your musical experiences in school and outside of school similar?**

Your answer

**In what ways are your musical experiences in school and outside of school different?**

Your answer

**What do you think is missing from music classes in school?**

Your answer

**How do you think Miss Putlock can make school music more meaningful to you?**

Your answer

**SUBMIT**

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.