What’s a white, middle-aged, middle-class, Midwestern woman like me doing in the thick of efforts at cultural diversity in music education? All are welcome, of course, to help multiculturalize (and globalize) curriculum and instruction in K-12 schools and in university programs that prepare music students for teaching positions, and those teachers who bring their experience and/or commitment to the cause of culturally responsive teaching are making a dent and a difference in the lives of their students. My own entry into ‘the movement’ was through my early teaching in the urban public schools of Cleveland and St. Louis, which led me to teaching teachers, and to many more years of preparing university students (most of them white and middle class) to teach children and youth who often do not look like, sound like, act like, or think like them. Together, through the facilitation of dialogues with cultural insiders and representatives of diverse communities in our seminars and workshops, we have come to realize that teachers and students are two sides of a cultural divide, typically distinguished by age, race and ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic circumstances, and lifestyles. We have been compelled to work through the complexities of education in music for students with genuine potential as singers, players, dancers, composers, and acute, analytical and imaginative listeners, to help them to realize all they can musically become. We are doing our best as teachers to think globally and act locally, and thereby to address musical and cultural diversity in the lessons we design and deliver.

In considering the ways and means for multiculturalizing music education, knowing the nature of music education in North America is relevant and useful. Since the 1950s, school music in the United States has consisted of band and choir (and some orchestra) ensembles at the high school level, with middle school music programs featuring ensemble classes and “general music”—that grab-bag class that encompasses listening experiences, composition and song-writing, periods of fundamental keyboard and guitar performance, and theory fundamentals. Music in elementary schools has long been song-based, and by the 1970s they were tilting in the direction of European-based pedagogies such that the influences of Carl Orff and Zoltan Kodaly were evident in instrumental exploration, speech rhythms, body movements (patting, clapping, stamping), solfege and singing, and basic music literacy. These trends have continued in the districts where music is supported and thus ‘saved’, often because of competitive school ensembles that take ‘1’s in festival ratings and are thus celebrated and sustained by parents and the broader community. Across the country, music is often compulsory in elementary schools, while states and provinces vary in their mandates to require music through sixth, or seventh, or eighth grade. By high school, it is not unusual for participation in elective musical study to drop below ten percent of the student population, especially if a district has no arts requirement.

In the best of situations, music is a vibrant experience for students in their elementary and secondary school years. When they are fully engaged in dynamic musical expression, as players in a chamber orchestra, drummers in a percussion ensemble, or singers in a mixed chorale, then students of every race and culture stand to reap the artistic, social-emotional, intellectual benefits of making music. The rise in recent years of “alternative ensembles”, traditional within cultures of origin though “non-traditional” in schools, is testimony to the greater attention paid by teachers to musical diversity and to the draw of some students to music that may feel as closer to their cultural identities. Trinidadian steel pan ensembles, Shona-style marimba bands, (West) African drumming groups, Mexican (and Mexican-American) mariachis, and gospel choirs are now
established offerings within numerous schools (Campbell, 2008). Textbooks, recordings, and online materials for teachers and their young students are consistently featuring women and minority musicians, including Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano, Opeta’ia Faia’e and Te Vaka, Ofrah Haza, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Thomas Mapfumo, Wynton Marsalis, Moana and the Moahunters, Carlos Nakai, Phong Nguyen, Eddie Palmieri, Ulali, Eva Ybarra. Songs for children are more international in flavor than in an early generation, and young people are now learning dances that stretch them far beyond the square dance, including the Bulgarian ruchenitsa, the Samoan sa-sa, the fandango dance of the Mexican son jarocho, the Lao lamvong, and the toi-toi movement of the South African Zulu.

Yet despite the increased musical diversity within curricular offerings, school music has developed a reputation in all too many settings for being emotionally flat and, for many students, less genuine, and lacking heart and soul. Music becomes sanitized and made for school (only), and is thus dangerously dull and unable to appeal to large segments of the school-age population of students. The cultural divide between teacher and students frequently manifests itself in music and music instruction that are simply not relevant to children and youth who come from decidedly different places than their teachers, and who not only know and value different musical expressions but also learn differently from the ways in which their teachers are teaching. Music education is far too often based upon long-standing and non-relevant models, with the greater intent of keeping kids in tow, well-managed as a group, and conforming to systemic social and behavioral principles. School music may also not be approached as the expressive-creative art it is, in that improvisation and composition are too rarely featured components in rehearsals and classes. In some settings, music is not even given its full due as a re-creative or performative art due to activities that are geared to teach about music rather than music-making itself. Music in these settings is unfortunately steered by weary teachers who worry over disruptive behaviors rather than to proactively design and deliver relevant and deeply musical experiences. These same teachers are seldom successful in meeting student learning goals, especially when they value crowd control over the artistic and social-emotional development of their individual students.

Music education is at a crossroads, and countless cutbacks to music in schools are telling of its devalued status in numerous communities. If music is to grow back into a steady-state position within the curriculum of the American common school, then music teachers—and those in higher education responsible for teaching musicians who are heading towards teaching positions—will need to develop methods and materials that are sensitive and relevant to a broad array of American communities. Programs will require culturally responsive teaching that takes into account the learning styles, interests, and needs of diverse populations of students. Multiculturalist Geneva Gay defines culturally responsive teaching as ‘using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively’ (2002). By examining the sociocultural nature of students, their families, and the local neighborhoods, teachers can then fashion suitable experiences. James A. Banks (2004) wrote of the importance of finding a balance between unity and diversity in the education of young people, writing that ‘citizens in a diverse democratic society should be able to maintain attachments to their cultural communities as well as participate effectively in the shared national culture’.

The future of music in elementary and secondary schools is directly linked to issues of diversity. Teachers (and those who educate them) will need to consider carefully the balance of tradition and change in determining the repertoire they build into long-standing school ensembles and classes, the development of a spectrum of ensembles—from the world’s musical cultures—for the participation of students of various communities, the values and needs of the local
community in which students live, and the methods and means by which they may facilitate music for students of various ages, races and ethnicities, religions, socioeconomic circumstances, and lifestyles. Meaningful musical education of children and youth is dependent upon teachers whose training is multimusical rather than grounded only in Western classical musicianship, and whose qualities include flexibility and invention, facilitation rather than the top-down delivery of antiseptic ‘standards’ and historic models that may not always fulfill contemporary needs, and an earnest attention to democratic principles in practice. These music teachers, with the support and guidance of music faculty in performance, theory, musicology and ethnomusicology, and education with whom they train, will raise musically expressive young students who can think and do music for its many benefits to them personally, socially, and artistically.

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