Preaching to the Choir: Incorporating Culturally Responsive Teaching in the Middle School Choral Classroom

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Abstract: This study is an extension of the pedagogical ideas put forth by Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Teaching. More specifically, it seeks to extend these pedagogical frameworks and apply them in a middle school choral classroom. To carry out this study, I first learned about my students’ musical preferences and backgrounds. With this knowledge, I created a culturally responsive sight-reading intervention that was implemented over a period of three weeks. This intervention sought to improve attitudes towards choral music as well as improve levels of academic achievement within the choral classroom. This study examines today’s music curriculum through a high-definition lens while also providing future educators with the framework to carry out future similar studies, either for their own personal benefit or for the betterment of music education as a whole.

Introduction

I conducted my student teaching at a middle school with an A day/B day schedule. In the choral classes at Esperanza Middle School in St. Mary’s County, there is a distinct difference between the achievement standards set in A Day classes versus B Day classes. Most of the students in the A Day classes are White and most of the B Day students are of a racial minority (e.g. Black, Hispanic, Asian). Though my mentor did a good job of treating all students equally, the B Day students have more behavioral problems and very rarely seem invested in the content material. Low minority student achievement in the middle school choral music classroom (B Day) is a growing problem, one that is acknowledged but not addressed. Our music education programs should reflect the changing racial, social, and ethnic demographics by becoming more culturally relevant. I wanted to explore ways to eliminate this achievement gap between my music classes by developing a more culturally relevant music education program that reflected my school’s varied demographics.

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is one approach to making classrooms culturally relevant. According to Geneva Gay (2010), it is important for teachers to understand several things: 1) The culture(s) that students already have are a part of what shapes them and thus should be incorporated into the classroom, 2) Learning styles can be
influenced by culture, and 3) Incorporating appropriate and authentic multicultural content into all aspects of teaching is absolutely crucial.

To me, being culturally responsive in the choral classroom has a lot to do with the selection and application of socially and culturally relevant music. This not only refers to the actual songs that will be performed, but also all other technical and supplementary materials. When it comes to performance-based subjects, such as chorus, too often the focus is placed on product over process. For example, rather than teaching students how to actually read music, some choral directors spoon-feed lyrics and melody all-year long in order to put on a good show at the end of the year. Ultimately, as students move on to more rigorous music programs, they have not developed the skills necessary in order to be good musicians, just good performers.

I also wanted to see if students’ attitudes towards music could be improved. I thought that looking at changes in attitude could provide insight as to whether or not being culturally responsive is helpful, in terms of increasing student interest. By increasing interest (i.e. more positive attitudes) in the choral classroom, I reasoned that lower-achieving students would inherently be more inclined to participate and do well in chorus. I decided to measure achievement in terms of sight-reading, since this particular skill is very important in the choral classroom, and helps determine overall musicianship. Being able to sing/play a brand new piece of music with relatively few mistakes is what makes a good musician, whereas not being able to sight-read is the equivalent of being musically illiterate. It is also one of the few performance-based skills that can be measured on a scale and can provide numerical data, making it ideal for an action study variable.

The main purpose of my study was to examine the effects of culturally responsive teaching in a middle school choral classroom with regards to student achievement in sight-reading and sight-singing (melodic sight-reading), and student attitudes towards choral music. Though my initial intention was to focus solely on the effects of CRT with minority groups, I later decided to include all students in this study in order to gain perspective on whether or not CRT is effective in the choral classroom, regardless of race/ethnicity. I believe that testing and observing all students in the classroom helps extinguish the problem of racial/ethnic segregation from the study altogether.

This study addresses a few of the questions and concerns that are brought to light by the MayDay Group. This group is an international association of music educators that seek to “apply critical theory and critical thinking to the purposes and practices of music education... to affirm the central importance of musical participation in human life and, thus, the value of music in the general education of all people” (Mayday Group, 2015). The very first strand of Action Ideals put forth by the MayDay Group deals with diverse communities and the reality that music learning is culturally situated. Directly stated in the first strand, “music learning works best when we are mindful, reflective, and critically aware of cultural contexts” (MayDay Group, 2015). In this study, I directly addressed the concept of culturally reflective teaching and how to strengthen music programs by helping students develop musicianship without compromising cultural diversity. I did this in two steps. First, I examined existing literature on culturally responsive teaching, both in general and in music settings, and developed a framework of principles intended to guide a music teacher in developing culturally relevant music classes. Next, using that framework, I developed an intervention to use cultural relevance to help my students learn sight-reading skills.
The intended audience for this study includes both pre-service and in-service teachers, specifically ensemble directors. In the literature review that follows, I examine: 1) what does culturally responsive teaching look like in the music classroom, and 2) what has already been studied in terms of being culturally relevant in a choral classroom. Next, I describe my intervention and how I evaluated its impact.

**Literature Review**

This literature review focuses on the application of diverse cultural materials in a music classroom. The specific topics that are addressed are as follows: 1) culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and multicultural education, 2) findings from studies about culturally responsive teaching in various classroom settings, and 3) selecting authentic and diverse repertoire.

**Culturally relevant pedagogy**

What is culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP)? What is culturally responsive teaching (CRT)? For the purposes of this study, these two theoretical frameworks are interchangeable. Both theories are grounded in the same fundamental principles: 1) diverse cultures should be seen as an invaluable resource in the classroom and not a deficit, 2) education should utilize the students’ unique cultures as a vehicle for learning, and 3) teachers should incorporate diverse teaching practices/multicultural content into all aspects of teaching. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that at the core of culturally responsive teaching is the notion that students must want to learn in order to succeed, and students learn and retain content that is most meaningful to them. Utilizing individual culture as a vehicle for learning is arguably the most logical way to connect with students, regardless of race or ethnicity.

In recent years, there has been more of a push to include multicultural topics and “music of the world” into general music classrooms – ultimately there is a theme of trying to “incorporate” the culture into the music classroom. Culturally responsive teaching “helps move the attention from the things we teach to the children we teach” (Abril, 2013, p. 8). Effective teachers (regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status) have the power to acknowledge the fact that students come into the classroom from a variety of different cultures. For the purposes of this study, “culture” not only refers to race and ethnicity, but also to linguistic background, musical aptitude, and current popular social trends. Effective teachers also adapt their materials, curriculum, and methods in order to more accurately represent the diverse cultures of their students, and thus their classroom culture. By emphasizing the fact that each and every student has a culture of their own that is important to incorporate into the classroom, students are better able to connect their academic learning experiences to their own lives, thus making the material relevant and meaningful. Students’ musical backgrounds, regardless of whether or not they meet the criteria set by the state for music education, are an important part of their identity. Utilizing that prior knowledge first will help in expanding upon new musical ideas.

The biggest promotion behind the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, besides the heavy emphasis on testing, was the notion that good teaching will transcend any form of racial or ethnic barrier. However, this is not the case and is one of several teaching
philosophies that needs to be revisited. Gay (2010) discussed and refuted several ideas regarding educating diverse populations, particularly the notion that a person’s heritage and culture is not important when it comes to education. There is this idea in education that to learn, all students’ need is a particular set of intellectual and social skills and inherently know how to apply them. There is also the belief that time should not be wasted on making sure that cultural diversity is acknowledged. Additionally, “too few teachers have adequate knowledge about how conventional teaching practices reflect European American cultural values... nor are the sufficiently informed about the cultures of different ethnic groups (Gay, 2010, Chapter 1, Section 1, para. 5).

How is it possible that one of the largest education reforms of our time overlooked something so crucial to our quickly diversifying nation, especially when teacher preparation programs are specifically looking for teachers who are trained and qualified to teach to diverse populations in diverse settings? Gay (2003) argued that “teachers must be multicultural themselves before they can effectively and authentically teach students to be multicultural” (p. 4). How can we expect students to appreciate, incorporate, and learn from their own cultures if we, as educators, cannot do the same? Moreover, it is readily understood that there are many different ways to learn, and that intellectual and physical capacities among students are different. In schools, there are strategies put in place to accommodate such needs, such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 plans. Different racial or ethnic backgrounds are forms of diversity that should be addressed and accommodated in schools. Though specific education plans are not necessary, being of a different culture or background should be treated as a gift rather than a disadvantage.

As stated before, the U.S. society is quickly becoming increasingly diverse, creating a challenge for teachers who are now more routinely faced with classrooms full of students from which they are culturally different. Thus, it is left up to teacher preparation programs, and often up to the teachers themselves, to create a classroom culture that reflects all backgrounds – theirs and those of their students.

Unfortunately, one huge issue that comes with the rise of multicultural education among classrooms is the fact that too many teachers are making assumptions about the strength of their students’ ethnic and cultural identities. Irizarry (2007) claims, “since identities are shaped by the context in which they are developed and are constantly being renegotiated, it is extremely difficult to pre-package one set of academic strategies that are likely to work with all members of a cultural group” (p. 23). For example, a teacher that decides to devote a lesson to learning about mariachi bands and traditional Mexican music with no other knowledge about his/her students other than the fact that they are of Mexican descent – this is not multicultural education. It is very possible that the Mexican student(s) were born in the U.S., do not speak Spanish, and do not feel a particular connection to Mexico. Or, the incorporation of Mexican music could possibly be construed as stereotypical and thus could potentially do more damage than good. Additionally, not all members of a particular group (in this case, the Mexican student population in the classroom) share the same common views of their culture – it is the personal history and experiences that shape a person’s perspective and cultural identity. Especially with students of Latino and/or Hispanic descent, it can be very tricky to incorporate culturally responsive material in the music classroom due to the fact that this particular group is very diverse – there are many ethnicities and cultures that fall under the umbrella term “Latino.”
As a Puerto Rican American, I saw this for myself growing up in an area where most Latinos were from Central and South America.

There are several issues that need to be addressed in order to effectively cultivate culturally responsive teaching practices in the music classroom, the first of which is the importance of establishing a solid community connection. All of the theory behind multicultural education and CRT is nothing without taking the time to invest in students and learning about what is going on in their communities and in their lives. It is also just as important to share personal, yet appropriate, information about yourself with your students in order to establish a real connection. As humans, we learn more from people we feel connected to, regardless of differences in cultural identity. Subsequently, allowing students to speak in their native languages in the classroom has proven to be effective in establishing a sense of trust and acceptance between the student and the teacher. By allowing students to use their most comfortable form of expression in the classroom, the teacher is inherently incorporating student culture in the classroom and is also sending the message that their culture is just as important and valid. Of course, there is a time for "official" academic language and a time when it is not as necessary – it is ultimately up to the teacher to encourage and celebrate both. Ultimately, the most exciting part about creating a culturally responsive music classroom is allowing students to express themselves in ways that are not possible in other subjects. Teachers can promote learning by creating a classroom that is socially constructed and negotiated by all participants. According to Irizarry (2007), “Although teachers cannot change the culture into which they were born and raised, they can gain a better understanding of their own culture, those of their students, and the historical relationship between the two” (p.27).

**CRT Application in Music Classrooms**

According to Mixon (2009),

“Culture, whether from ethnic or other origins, has great power to motivate students and should be used as contexts for learning. Creating culturally responsive ensembles will increase student interest and enrollment as well as garner the support from school and community stakeholders needed to sustain musical performing groups in our schools” (p. 71).

Because music as a subject can span across several different sub-genres (i.e. general music, instrumental music, choral music), in the following section I synthesized findings and suggestions of best practice in various music settings.

As a teacher determined to move towards a more culturally responsive general music classroom, I believe it is important to consider several key elements: 1) know your students both in and out of the classroom. Not only is this essential for building trust and rapport with your students, but it will help with something as simple as planning lessons as well. 2) Emphasize a social learning community – In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) explains that students are not just empty vessels awaiting knowledge; they are to co-learn with the teacher. Simply put, teachers can learn from students, too. 3) Include specific student experiences in class and recognize multiple perspectives and opinions. 4) when selecting multicultural music and materials, be mindful of what you are choosing – be
sure to choose materials that are relevant to your students and that do not inadvertently negatively stereotype a certain culture.

The findings with regards to CRT application in choral and instrumental settings are very similar to what was found for the general music classroom. The ultimate goal is to be able to provide engaging and inclusive programs that draw from students’ experiences, and there are several ways to go about doing so: 1) include multiple ethnicities – incorporating diversity into the traditional ensembles through authentic repertoire. 2) Tap into multiple sources – ethnic culture is not the only affiliation students may have – they also identify with youth, pop, religious, and local cultures. Using music that means something to students will increase the likelihood of improvement in performance. 3) Create specialized or alternative ensembles, for example a “steel drum band” or a “mariachi band.” However, it is important to make sure that the goals and objectives in these groups are met regardless of the style or instrumentation. They should not just be for entertainment purposes. It is also important that the training model of these specialized ensembles follows the model of traditional instruction for that particular style (i.e. teaching how to play instruments the way those instruments would traditionally be taught in their original culture). In the same way that the music should be authentic, the teaching styles should be authentic as well. 4) Cultivate a local support system – draw from student and community culture; parents and other community members usually respond favorably to familiar authentic music.

Goetze (2000) offers some choral specific suggestions for performing multicultural music in the choral classroom: (1) Honor the culture by deferring to the experts, speak with the native artists, and be sensitive to what is being performed, i.e. recreate the music with integrity. (2) Learn the music aurally – many diverse cultures learn music aurally. (3) Educate students about their own voices and how they will be exploring unfamiliar methods. (4) Imitate the visual aspects of the traditional performance. (5) Share information about the music and culture with the audience with program notes or spoken comments by a native performer.

Selecting Diverse Repertoire

The most important takeaway from implementing a multicultural and culturally responsive teaching method in the classroom is making sure that the content (i.e. music) is actually relevant to the students in that particular classroom. The first step has been clearly stated – get to know your students, learn about their cultures and backgrounds, and make it known that in your music classroom all cultures will have equal weight and merit. Once the trust has been established, the next logical step is to select authentic diverse music.

The ninth national music standard refers to the ability to understand music in relation to history and culture (National Standards for Music Education, 2014). However, truly understanding multicultural and diverse music is more than just knowing where it originated from and performing it. Diverse music needs to be of high quality in addition to being age-appropriate, interesting, and authentic. There is a reason we hear more Mozart and Beethoven than any other composers of that time – they worked specifically to create music that both went along with the style of the time, but that was new and refreshing as well – the same goes for The Beatles (Gault, 2006). These characteristics are what need to be looked for when selecting diverse music for the classroom.
Many “diverse” works that are being performed are not authentic, meaning that they are composed and arranged by Western-trained musicians simply based on diverse material (Abril, 2006). In these cases, all that is provided are translation and pronunciation guides. Additionally, Western standard notation and staff arrangement fails to accommodate some more complex scales, such as Indian, Turkish, and others. The vocal technique can also vary greatly from Western choral style as opposed to Eastern European styles or African styles. In order for students to gain a truly diverse musical experience from another culture, the music needs to be learned, arranged, and performed in a manner and style that is consistent with that culture. There should also be supplementary material to help students further grasp the culture that they are exploring.

As previously mentioned, American music education has been largely based on Eurocentric frameworks. Shaw (2012) argues that rejecting a person’s language is like rejecting that person, yet in North American schools today it is perfectly acceptable to reject everything except English in the classroom. Despite the fact that American choral music education has a very strong foundation in the western classical tradition, “singing provides an accessible avenue for both validating students’ own cultural backgrounds and teaching about diverse cultures, choral music education has the potential to be at the forefront of making music education as a whole more culturally responsive” (Shaw, p. 76).

Incorporating diverse music in the classroom is not as simple as it sounds. The problem with selecting repertoire is that students may identify with more than one culture, or belong to a particular social category may not identify with the correlating culture. Shaw (2012) explains that “Selecting quality arrangements or performing in a variety of languages might be important first steps, but can fall short of cultural responsiveness when accompanied by assumptions that any single musical tradition is representative of or relevant to all people of a given cultural background” (p. 77).

She suggests that before selecting any music for the classroom, getting to know the students is the most important step – use student questionnaires, seek parental involvement, have students bring in music examples from their homes. If possible, choirs should have the opportunity to work with musicians native to each studied culture (Shaw, 2012). Choral repertoire must function along two dimensions: cultural responsiveness and cultural validity.

Furthermore, Shaw (2012) makes a case for the benefits of culturally responsive teaching in the music classroom as a starting point for more open and productive dialogue. Though the music selections for the classroom need to abide by school rules and regulations (e.g. must be appropriate), the occasional inclusion of culturally insensitive materials in classroom study has the potential to be beneficial – racial and ethnic insensitivity needs to be addressed more, particularly in the higher grade levels (middle and high school). By providing a safe space for students to engage in the analysis of sociopolitical matters and discuss greater issues, the teacher is creating a connection with the students and building the trust necessary in order to really incorporate culturally responsive teaching in the classroom. Shaw (2012) claims that “Musical experiences generate the momentum to move students along the continuum... culturally responsive teaching refers to repertoire, methods, [and] knowledge not in isolation but, rather, in synergy with one another, resulting in musical experiences that are more relevant to and effective for culturally diverse students” (p. 79).
Essentially, applying multicultural and culturally responsive teaching methods in a music ensemble requires: 1) learning and performing diverse music in the way that is supposed to be learned and performed in that culture, and (2) developing your understanding of how the music functions within its original culture.

**Intervention**

Once I had developed a personal framework about what culturally relevant music teaching should look like, I set out to try it out for myself, as a way to address the achievement gap I found in my student teaching placement.

**Population and Setting**

The population of this study consists of approximately eighty 8th grade choral music students at a middle school located in St. Mary’s County in Maryland. Of the students that are currently attending the school, 59% identify as White, 25% identify as Black/African American, and about 16% identify as Latino, Asian, or more than two races. The study sample is split between four 8th grade choral classrooms. The school runs on an A/B Day schedule, with each of the four classes meeting approximately 2-3 times a week for 45-minute periods, depending on the week.

**Intervention**

The goal of my intervention was to improve student sight-reading achievement in the choral classroom by using music that is relevant to them and their various cultures. I took this information and used it to select relevant repertoire that I then adapted and converted into rhythmic and melodic sight-reading exercises for class.

There four 8th grade choral classrooms at the middle school are two on A Day and two on B Day. One of the 8th grade classes on A Day and one of the 8th grade classes on B Day received the intervention (they are the experimental group), and the other two classes did not. This step was necessary in order to determine whether or not the CRT intervention was the specific source of improved achievement in sight-reading. The control group instead received pre-written sight-reading practice for the same amount of time that the experimental groups received the culturally responsive sight-reading practice.

The first step in this process was to get to know my students well enough to be able to select music that was both socially and culturally relevant to them. In addition to having them complete a survey about their attitudes to music class and their musical interests, I created relationships with my students by spending extra time both during school (lunch duty) and after school with them while helping with a play (Peter Pan). The survey that I administered to all the students participating in the project consisted of 7 open ended questions and 7 likert scale questions. Reading through all of the open ended responses helped to inform what genres and songs I would use as a part of my intervention.

As this project developed I realized that when it comes to music, my students are influenced by American pop culture and social media more so than their individual ethnic and racial heritage. This means that most of my students responded that they are listening to what is being played on the radio and is currently popular. For example, the very first open-ended question on the survey is: What genres of music are you currently listening to?
the most? The top three responses were pop, hip-hop, and country. The second question asked students to specify artists they are currently listening to the most – the responses here varied greatly, however the artists that were mentioned the most were the ones currently at the top of the music charts. I did not get any responses from students reflecting their specific races and ethnicities – for example, because I grew up in a Puerto Rican household, I still listen to a lot of Salsa. The variance with the races and ethnicities of my students did not really affect their responses when it came to the genres and artists they were selecting.

After compiling a list of genres and artists from the survey (Appendix I), I began creating the melodic and rhythmic sight-reading exercises. The experimental group received 15 minutes a day for 8 days of culturally responsive sight-reading training. Using what my students told me on the survey about their musical preferences and cultural and societal backgrounds, I selected 8 relevant songs and created rhythmic and melodic sight-reading exercises that we used in class. For example, I had a large percentage of students in one of my 8th grade classes report that they listened to Taylor Swift, so I took a Taylor Swift song and created an original exercise (Appendix G) from the song’s melodies and rhythms, using the music notation software Finale NotePad 2012. The control group also received 15 minutes a day for 8 days of training, but they received pre-written exercises I retrieved from various sight-reading compilation books selected by my mentor.

Additionally I had to come up with exactly how I would be using the culturally relevant exercises in the classroom in a way that is accessible to all of my students. What I ended up with was a game I called “Mystery Sample”. Everyday for the duration of the unit, I would give the students in the experimental group a worksheet to work on with a short rhythmic and melodic example on it and some guided questions. Because there is only one sample per day, it is likely that not every student in the class is going to be familiar with that particular example. Therefore, students worked in groups to “solve the mystery” using their prior knowledge and sight-reading skills. For example, for one lesson I used the song All of Me by John Legend (Appendix H) – with both written and verbal directions, I walked students through the thought process of “sight-reading” by asking them to answer questions such as “what is the key signature?” and “how would this be clapped rhythmically?” Once groups were finished working through the directions and questions, I allowed groups time at the piano to try to answer the final question – what song is it? By answering the questions and working through the different mystery samples, my students were further developing their sight-reading and sight-singing skills without even realizing it. With the control group, I used similar techniques – however they did not receive any of the examples that I created on my own. They still did “Mystery Sample”, but the songs were not any of the popular or current songs (i.e. the Star-Spangled Banner and Happy Birthday were a few that were used).

Contrary to popular belief, sight-reading stems directly from one’s own musicianship – it is the ability to read music. It is not some magical skill that appears when you are required to do it at an audition or as part of a test in class. Much like reading a book, the only sure-fire way to improve upon sight-reading skills is to focus on how you are reading the music and to improve upon the little details that go into making sense of a brand new piece of music. Thus, the intervention involves the two most important components of reading music that can be practiced over time in order to improve sight-
reading skills – rhythm and melody. In the classroom, I focused first on rhythmic sight-reading and later moved towards one and two-part melodic reading.

**Evaluation of the Intervention**

To determine whether my intervention worked, I explored whether the study and application of authentic and culturally diverse music (CRT intervention) affected two things: student achievement in sight-reading and student attitude towards choral music. My research questions were:

1. What are my students’ current musical interests/preferences?
2. Does participating in the CRT intervention have a positive impact on students’ rhythmic and melodic **sight-reading skills**?
3. Does participating in the CRT intervention have a positive impact on students’ **attitudes towards chorus**?

**Methodological Approach**

To answer those questions, I used a mixed-method design. I began by gathering qualitative data to explore my topic, i.e. the musical preferences and cultures of participating students. Then, I collected quantitative data to measure whether the students who received culturally relevant sight reading (SR) pieces learned to sight read more quickly or easily than those students who received generic sight reading exercises. I also collected quantitative data to measure whether receiving culturally relevant sight-reading training positively affected students’ attitudes towards chorus. The framework of this study centers around how the I used the qualitative approach to determine student interests, and the quantitative approach to determine whether tailoring classwork to those interests would increase learning and positive attitudes. (Creswell, 2012).

I had three sources of data for my study. The first was an open-ended survey (Appendix A) that asked students about their current musical backgrounds: the current artists they listen to the most, what their parents and siblings listen to, their own choral and instrumental background, and the choral and instrumental background of their families. The results from the survey informed what music I selected and adapted for the experimental group. The second source of data for this study was a sight-reading pre/post-test (Appendix C). The test had two components: multiple choice questions, and rhythmic/melodic sight-reading graded on a rubric scale. The third source of data for my
study was the likert scale questionnaire (Appendix B) where students rated their attitudes towards chorus as they relate to the following: enjoyment, sight-reading self-efficacy, and relevance. By having the students give numerical responses as opposed to open-ended, it was possible for me to analyze the data and see whether or not the intervention affected their attitudes, either positively or negatively.

The open-ended survey was only administered once at the beginning of the study, the sight-reading test was administered pre-intervention and post-intervention, and the likert scale questionnaire was administered pre-intervention and post-intervention. In Table 1, you can see how each data source addresses my research questions.

Table 1

*Research questions and data sources*

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<th>Research question</th>
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<td>1) What are my students’ current musical interests/preferences?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2) Does participating in the CRT intervention have a positive impact on students’ rhythmic and melodic sight-reading skills?</td>
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<td>3) Does participating in the CRT intervention have a positive impact on students’ attitudes towards chorus?</td>
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Data analysis

Source 1, the open-ended survey, informed my repertoire and music selection for the study. The qualitative data was analyzed using an excel spreadsheet to compile and record student responses. By organizing the responses in a manner that allowed me to easily recognize the major similarities and differences between my classes, I was able to apply the information while selecting repertoire to use during the intervention.

Source 2, the sight-reading test, is quantitative for the purposes of this study. This test was given pre- and post-intervention for a grade. The data was collected and averaged for pre- and post intervention and t-test was used to determine whether or not there was significant change in student achievement after the intervention was administered.

Source 3, the likert scale questionnaire, is also quantitative. The questionnaire was administered before and after the unit and data was collected and analyzed using a t-test to
determine whether or not there was a significant change in student attitudes towards chorus.

Validity concerns

A main validity concern for this kind of study is the memory effect that accompanies pre-post testing. If the two administrations are too close together in time, it is very possible that the students will remember their answers from the first time they were tested. Even though sight-reading and sight singing tests are oral, there is still a possibility that the students will remember the rhythmic or melodic sequences from the pre-test. One way to address this issue would be to use a different pre- and post-test, in which the tests remain equal in what they measure and in rigor.

Another validity concern is whether or not I taught the control and experimental groups the same in every way except the choice of music to sight-read. I did my best to make sure that both groups received the same amount of time, attention to detail, and teaching delivery during this unit. I debriefed daily with my mentor teacher to make sure that the lessons between groups were covering the same concepts and were the same, the only difference being the specific sight-reading material that was being worked with.

Debriefing sessions addressed any issues that arose during the intervention, such as recurring student absences, students switching schedules, cheating, etc. Grading scales and rubrics were also determined and set prior to giving both the pre- and post-tests as to avoid any impartial grading discrepancies from my mentor or myself.

Findings and interpretations

The following section consists of findings from the data collected using the previously described methods. Using these findings, I interpreted what they mean relative to both my research questions and the study’s entire rationale: how can culturally responsive teaching be used as a framework to boost student achievement and positive attitude in a choral classroom?

What are my students’ current musical interests and preferences?

It would go against the entire framework of this project if I had created the materials for my lessons before gathering information on what my students were actually listening to. In addition to getting to know my students through daily in school and after school interaction, I handed out an open-ended survey to all four 8th Grade classes that were involved in this project entitled “That’s My Kinda Music!” From this survey, I compiled the responses from all 8th grade classes into two charts, one chart for the responses from A Day students and the other for responses from B Day students. The charts below provide a visual representation of the musical genre preferences across all four classes.
Figure 1: Preferred genres, 8th Grade Chorus, A Day

Figure 1 shows that a majority (31%) of both A Day classes preferred to listen to pop music as their primary music of choice. “Pop music” is not to be confused with the term “popular music”, as they are often used interchangeably. In the context of this study, music that falls under the category of “pop” has definitive elements such as the basic verse-chorus structure, repeated choruses, melodic tunes, and hooks. The second highest preference across the A Day classes was rap at 13%. In this context, the term rap refers to a genre of music in which words are recited quickly and rhythmically over an instrumental track. The lowest preference amongst the A Day classes was electronic/techno music at 7%.

Figure 2: Preferred genres, 8th Grade Chorus, B Day
Figure 2 shows an even tie for majority (23%) in the B Day classes, where students equally preferred to listen to hip-hop and rap as their primary music of choice. The second highest preference across B day classes was pop music at 17%. The lowest preference amongst the B Day classes was alternative music at 3%. It was important for me to create two different charts, one for A Day and one for B Day, because of the big differences between the populations of students on A Day versus B Day. My students on A Days preferred pop to rap and hip-hop, in contrast to the preferences of my students on B Days. I used these figures as a further rationale when creating the “mystery samples” for each of my classes, i.e. for my A Day classes, I incorporated more popular music into my intervention and for my B Days I incorporated more rap and hip-hop into my intervention (Appendix I). The foundation of culturally responsive teaching lies in being able to bridge the gap between what students are learning outside of school and what they are learning in school – in this case, what students are listening to when they are not sitting in chorus class.

Does participating in the CRT intervention have a positive impact on students’ rhythmic and melodic sight-reading skills?

The pre-post sight-reading test that was given to groups produced one overall grade for the pre and the post administrations. The reason behind not having individual tests for melodic and rhythmic sight-reading is because the two go hand-in-hand. In order to sight-read a piece of music correctly, a person needs to be able to read the rhythmic patterns correctly while also singing the proper melodic pitches, i.e. rhythmic sight-reading proficiency is necessary in order to attain melodic sight-reading proficiency.

Achievement. To measure students’ overall achievement in sight-reading, I gave all four of my classes a pre/post test (Appendix C) that consisted of four multiple-choice questions, a rhythmic sight-reading section, and a melodic sight-reading section. The rhythmic and the melodic sections were scored on a 10-point rubric scale, and that score was added to the multiple-choice score. The maximum points available to earn on both pre- and post-tests is 14 points.

Table 2

<table>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>10.65</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
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<tr>
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<td>11.53</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
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<tr>
<td>8th Period, B</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.63</td>
<td>10.09</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 3
*t-test results comparing students’ academic growth in experimental versus control groups*

<table>
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<th>n.</th>
<th>Δ</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>49</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>p = .73</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control (8th)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2.32</td>
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Table 2 shows that all four classes significantly improved from pre-test to post-test, therefore it cannot be inferred that this growth was due specifically to the culturally responsive intervention. It is possible that the extra amount of time spent focusing on sight-reading, regardless of cultural relevance, was what did the trick. Table 3 shows that $p = .73$, meaning that the experimental group did not grow significantly more than the control group with regards to academic achievement. The original hypothesis, that the experimental group would show significant academic improvement over the control group, did not come to fruition.

Though the $p$-values for the individual classes within the experimental group show significant improvement from pre-test to post-test, it cannot be inferred that this improvement was because of the incorporation of culturally responsive material. However, it is still a good sign that all four classes showed improvement and growth from pre- to post-test – this means that more sight-reading practice in general is beneficial in the classroom, regardless of it’s cultural relevance.

Does participating in the CRT intervention have a positive impact on students’ attitudes towards choral music?

*Attitude.* To measure students’ overall attitudes towards choral music I gave all 8th grade students a Likert questionnaire [Appendix B] to fill out both before and after the intervention. This questionnaire was seven items long and included a scale of one to seven – one indicated “strongly disagree” while seven indicated “strongly agree.” In order to more accurately address what is meant by “attitude” in the choral classroom, I divided the questions to cover three different attributes of chorus that determine a students’ attitude towards the class as a whole. These three attributes are as follows: Enjoyment of chorus, sight-reading self-efficacy, and relevance.

Table 4 shows average ratings for each class from their pre-intervention and post-intervention likert scale responses. Also shown above are the $p$-values for each class, showing the change in attitude from pre- to post-intervention.
Table 4

t-test results comparing student growth with regards to attitude

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5th Pd., A day</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>4.77</td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>4.65</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.91</strong></td>
<td><em>p &lt; .001</em></td>
<td><strong>4.63</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.35</strong></td>
<td><strong>p = .02</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.25</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.65</strong></td>
<td><strong>p &lt; .001</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>5.18</strong></td>
<td><em>p = .41</em></td>
<td><strong>4.64</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.45</strong></td>
<td><em>p = .33</em></td>
<td><strong>3.18</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.27</strong></td>
<td><em>p = .10</em></td>
</tr>
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</table>

For 5th period A Day, the pre-intervention mean scores show that before the sight-reading intervention, students agreed on average that they enjoyed their time in chorus, they were confident in their sight-reading abilities, but chorus was not relevant to them. The post-intervention mean scores show no significant change with regards to enjoyment and self-efficacy. However, with *p = .03*, students agreed that chorus became more relevant to them after the intervention. For 8th period A Day, the pre-intervention mean scores show that before the sight-reading intervention, students agreed on average that they enjoyed their time in chorus, they were confident in their sight-reading abilities, but chorus was not relevant to them. The post-intervention mean scores show no significant change with regards to all three attributes.

For 5th period B Day, the pre-intervention mean scores show that before the sight-reading intervention, students agreed on average that they enjoyed their time in chorus, they were confident in their sight-reading abilities, but did not believe that chorus was relevant to them. This class showed the most change from pre-intervention to post-intervention. All mean scores increased from pre- to post- and all *p*-values are significant. It can be inferred, then that teaching using culturally responsive techniques significantly improved their enjoyment of chorus, their sight-reading self-efficacy, and their belief that chorus is relevant to them. For 8th period B Day, the pre-intervention mean scores show that before the sight-reading intervention, students agreed on average that they enjoyed their time in chorus, they were confident in their sight-reading skills, but did not believe that chorus was relevant to them. The post-intervention mean scores show no significant change with regards to all three attributes.

Discussion of results

Preference. As figures 1 and 2 show, most of my students either identified with pop, hip-hop, or rap music. Because of these results, I tailored most of my intervention materials to focus primarily on these three genres of music. I incorporated some country, R&B, and electronic music into the intervention unit as well, in order to avoid ostracizing students.
that did not particularly identity with one of the top three genres. Additionally, the reason behind having students in groups as they completed the "mystery sample" work was because not every student on a given day is going to know or be familiar with the song I’ve selected as the mystery sample.

*Achievement.* As shown by the data above, it is inferred that the culturally responsive sight-reading intervention did not have a significant effect on student achievement. In other words, the students in the experimental group did not “learn more” or get significantly better scores on their sight-reading tests than the students in the control group. While all four classes in both groups significantly improved their scores from pre-test to post-test, it cannot be inferred that the improvement was due to anything more than the increased practice time and exposure to the material during the unit.

*Attitude.* On the other hand, according the data shown above, it can be inferred than the culturally responsive sight-reading intervention did have a significant effect on student attitudes towards chorus. For students in the A Day classes, the sight-reading intervention did not have much an effect on their attitudes towards chorus at all, with the exception of 5th period and the significant increase in relevance. These findings are not surprising, considering that the students I had in my A Day classes were generally already interested in chorus and had relatively positive attitudes towards the class. It is not un-expected that their attitudes did not alter significantly for the most part because of the intervention, regardless of which one they received (experimental or control).

For students in the B Day classes, the sight-reading intervention did seem to have quite an effect on their attitudes towards chorus. 5th period received the experimental sight-reading intervention and their attitude towards chorus positively increased all across the board. This class reported significant increases in enjoyment of chorus, self-efficacy with sight-reading, and relevance of chorus. Unfortunately, 8th period showed no significant increase or improvement in attitudes towards chorus. This shows that while this class did not receive the culturally responsive intervention, they would have most likely benefitted from it. These positive findings prove that the culturally responsive intervention really worked for the students I had in my B Day classes, given they were generally less interested in chorus and had less positive attitudes towards the class. I can infer that if I had done the culturally responsive intervention with 8th period B Day, their attitudes towards chorus would have likely improved more significantly.

**Conclusion**

As students, we easily forget subject matter that does not relate to our lives in any way. As teachers, it is our job to make sure that we are reaching every student in the classroom, despite differences in ethnicity, race, heritage, or socioeconomic status. The same way the music has evolved over time, so should music education. The push towards incorporating multicultural music in the classroom is a step in the right direction, however the focus should now be on making the music of different cultures relevant. I posed the question, “will culturally responsive teaching positively affect academic achievement and attitude in the middle school choral classroom?” Through this study I found that while making sight-reading exercises culturally relevant did not have a direct effect on student achievement, it had a skyrocketing effect on student attitudes, particularly with students...
that felt less of a connection with chorus in the first place. This study had a positive effect on students that originally felt as though their “musical culture” was not validated in the choral classroom. With more time and a larger sample size, it is likely that this study could have yielded even more significant results.

Limitations

*Experience.* This was my first experience designing and carrying out action research in the classroom. I was conducting my research in addition to teaching four other classes each day. There were difficulties, at times, attaining data, analyzing, and carrying out instruction all at once.

*High-mobility rate.* For the purpose of this study, high-mobility refers to the students switching in and out of chorus class. Because this study took place over the course of 6 weeks, there were some students that started the study and were switched out to a different class. There were also students that had their schedules switched from A Day to B Day in the middle of the semester. There was also a high rate of student absence in the B Day classes, due to a high referral rate. This means that many of the students from my B Day classes would spend their days in ISI (In School Intervention) and would not be able to make it to chorus. Because of these issues, there were approximately 18 students that were taken out of this study (total from all four 8th grade classes) due to incomplete data.

Implications

*General Practice.* To music educators facing similar issues in their own classrooms, I would recommend this approach. However, because I conducted this action research in a classroom other than my own, I was not able to start this research at the beginning of the year. I had to conform to some of the sight-reading practices already set in place by my mentor teacher, whereas if I had my own classroom I would have been able to establish my own practices from day one.

*Sample Size.* For those interested in expanding on the research I began with this study, I would recommend using a larger sample size. As previously mentioned, several students had to be removed from the study due to unreliable or incomplete data. What started out as a 95-person study turned out to be a 77-person study by the time all the students that needed to be taken out of the study were removed.

*Recording.* Additionally, I would recommend recording the sight-reading and sight-singing portions of the pre- and post-tests. I graded each student using a strict rubric and compared my scores to what my mentor teacher put down for each student as we tested them in order to get an unbiased grade. However, having the ability to replay and make sure that the scores are fair for each student would greatly decrease the probability of human error in judging/grading.

Culturally responsive teaching is empowering. By validating students’ values, prior experiences, and overall cultural knowledge, we allow them to embrace their differences and learn from them. It’s like rebuilding a house – rather than destroy a good foundation, build upon it. Building on what students already know is the key. The real results of this study show that taking the time to foster a culturally responsive learning environment is mutually beneficial for both students and teachers. Teachers can learn from students’ cultures, and can improve their own teaching by varying their approaches based on their learners. Taking the time to acknowledge that every single student comes to you with a
culture all their own is not only what will help with becoming a more responsive teacher, but a better global citizen.

**Where the Roads Come Together**
Performed by *Up with People*, from the album *Live*

"None of us is born the same
We don't know why, it's the way we came
Ev'ry heart beats a little differently
Each soul is free to find its way
Like a river that winds its way to the sea."
References


Appendix A

Open-ended survey

That’s My Kinda Music!
Please take about 10-15 minutes to answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Answer truthfully – this is to help me teach you!

1. What genre of music are you currently listening to the most (examples: rap, hip-hop, country)?

2. What artists are you currently listening to most (give names of people, bands, groups) – You can include names of songs or albums.

3. How do you learn about new music (websites, radio, Spotify, iTunes)?

4. What music is listened to or played at home?

5. Do you sing or play any instruments?

6. Does anyone in your family sing or play an instrument (or both)?

7. Why did you decide to take choir this year?
Appendix B

Likert scale questionnaire

_That’s My Kinda Music!_

Circle the number that _best describes_ your feelings on the following statements:

8. I have a good time in chorus.

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |

9. I enjoy coming to chorus.

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |

10. I feel confident with my sight-reading/sight-singing abilities.

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |

11. Being in chorus has helped me become a better musician.

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |

12. I can read music well.

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |

13. The music we learn in chorus is relevant to me, and my musical preferences.

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |

14. I like the music we sing in chorus.

| Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Strongly Agree |
Appendix C

Sight-reading pre/post test

Name: ________________________________ Date: ________________________

Please circle the correct answer:

1. How do we determine which solfege syllable to start on when we are sight-reading a piece of music?
   a) Look at the time signature
   b) Look at the key signature
   c) “Do” is always C
   d) Both a and b

2. If a piece of music is in the key of C, what note would we sing “do” on?
   a) B
   b) C
   c) A
   d) G

3. If a piece of music is in the key of D, what note would we sing “do” on?
   a) D
   b) C
   c) A
   d) B

4. If a piece of music is in the key of C, what note would we sing “mi” on?
   a) F
   b) G
   c) C
   d) E

5. Rhythmic & Melodic Sight Reading

   Rhythmic Example: _______ Melodic Example: _______ Score: ___/10

   Circle the appropriate number in each category. (5 - remained in tempo, correct pitches/rhythms; 4 - one error; 3 - started over with correct pitches and rhythms, or two errors; 2 - started over with one error, or three errors; 1 - started over with two errors, or four errors; 0 - started over with three or more errors, or five errors, or no attempt)

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</table>
Appendix D

Melodic pre/post test melodic examples

Example 1

Example 2

Example 3
Appendix E

Rhythmic pre/post test melodic examples

Example A

Example B

Example C

Example D
Appendix F

CRT Intervention “mystery sample”

What key are we in? (The key signature is located between the clef and the time signature)

What’s the first note? (Hint: I’m looking for the letter name, not the solfege syllable)

Write out the (letter) notes in the first two measures.

What song is this? (Hint: It’s a mixed-genre song, several artists have collaborated on it)
Appendix G

CRT Intervention “mystery sample”

What key are we in? (The key signature is located between the clef and the time signature)

What’s the first note? (Hint: I’m looking for the letter name, not the solfege syllable)

Once you’ve answered the first two questions, come to the front of the classroom with your group and I will help you play it on the piano.

What song is it? (Hint: It falls under the “pop” genre)
Appendix H

CRT Intervention “mystery sample”

What key are we in? (The key signature is located between the clef and the time signature)

What’s the first note? (Hint: I’m looking for the letter name, not the solfege syllable)

Write out the (letter) notes in the first two measures. Once you’ve done so, come to the front of the classroom with your group and I will help you play it on the piano.

What song is this? (Hint: It is by a current male R&B artist)
Appendix I

List of genres/songs/artists used for experimental CRT intervention

Pop: *Blank Space* – Taylor Swift

Pop/Alternative: *Stay With Me* – Sam Smith

Pop/Electronic: *I Want You To Know* - Zedd


Hip-Hop: *Watch Me* (Whip/Nae Nae) - Silento

R&B: *All of Me* – John Legend

Country: *Cruise* - Zedd

Mixed genre: *FourFiveSeconds* – Rihanna, Paul McCartney, Kanye West