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Racism in American Elementary Music Education

Although American music classrooms may seem like the perfect place for inclusion, there has been debate over how truly “diverse” they may be, especially considering outdated elementary music methods and songbooks (Hall, 2000). The use of such music can instill internalized racism in students without them even realizing it, and can cause students who are people of color to feel ostracized from the rest of the class. When teachers employ songs within outdated books, they are enabling racism (Hess, 2017). Some educators argue that neutral-language must be used in the classroom, while others think explicit descriptions are essential to a proper understanding of history (Hess, 2017). Although some teachers are progressing towards “anti-racism” (Rastas & Seye, 2019), is it enough to make a difference?

In 2000, Julia Hall conducted a review of three elementary music series from the publisher Silver-Burdett written between the 1930s and 1995. She found that the few African-cultural pieces were poorly representative of people of color, including drawings that looked like white people committing black-face. These pieces fail to show achievements, instead focusing on times of enslavement, without a description of how and why the songs had originated. In contrast, songs portrayed European-Americans proudly, although the 1930s edition was published during the Great Depression (Hall, 2000). One might assume such books would no longer be used nearly a quarter of a century after the newest installment, but this is not the case. Students enrolled in Western Michigan University’s General Music Methods course were required to use the 1995 publication in 2019. In order to be inclusive of people of color teachers

must refuse use of these songbooks and instead turn to works appropriately portraying their successes. Furthermore, elementary music method books need to be updated and their publishers should be held accountable (Hall, 2000).

Outdated books and the avoidance of explicit language can lead to the misunderstanding of concepts, history, and culture. Euphemisms such as the phrase, “in comparison to,” are often used when a teacher is afraid of discussing a topic that parents and administrators might view as controversial, such as the inclusion of Afrocentric, Latinx, and other cultural music in the classroom -- specifically in schools of which student bodies are mostly caucasian -- systemically promoting white supremacy by only focusing on music composed by dead white men (Hess, 2017). Afrocentric music is not *similar to* European-American music; it simply is Afrocentric music. Using explicit language in an anti-racist space can bring awareness to the meaning of race and why it matters (Rastas & Seye, 2019).

Since race is not something that is often discussed in music classes, especially at the elementary level, students avoid the conversation. This, however, is something that teachers need to bring awareness to in order to stop minority discourse (Hess, 2017). Many of these students will steer clear of such discussions in fear of offending their peers, as they are too ill-informed to have a valid argument; this is why it is important for teachers to instill an understanding at a young age to help raise socially aware individuals (Hess, 2017). Teachers often enable the erasure of culturally diverse music, when they should instead enforce the exact opposite. By giving the problem a name -- racism -- society can begin to take steps towards solving it; this is why anti-racist spaces for learning music education are so important (Rastas & Seye, 2019).

If teachers are expected to enforce the understanding of racism, how should they incorporate this in the classroom? Some may suggest changing the way classroom music is evaluated. Many teachers focus on technique, notes, and rhythms: pre-written compositions rather than improvisation. This can lead to the erasure of genres different than those of European origin, as more culturally diverse genres such as jazz, funk, hip-hop, and rap value musicality, expression, and creativity (Hess, 2014). The shift from technical to musical evaluation can help one involve more diverse music within their lessons. Once this change is in place, they can begin to add context to the music. Who wrote it? Why did they write it? What was happening in the world when they wrote it? Conversation about questions such as those mentioned can lead to the discussion of social justice issues, current events, and historical connections (Hess, 2014). The students need to know why they are learning a specific piece of music, helping them to sympathize with other cultures.

In addition to students gaining unfamiliar musical experiences, it is important to use pieces that represent their heritage. Many urban schools are beginning to implement the inclusion of hip-hop songs because it is something their students can relate to (Pulido, 2009). These schools often have a high percentage of minority students. Inclusion is crucial to these students because it helps to show them that their cultures are just as valued as the European cultures that are so heavily employed in typical music classes (Pulido, 2009). This can be incredibly advantageous for white students that might not receive a culturally-enriching education in any other subject. Having an awareness of different styles of music can be used as a device for social-consciousness, eventually leading to more informed individuals (Pulido, 2009).

Since society is concerned with ending racism and closing the achievement gap, it is necessary to begin identifying what the problem is and creating a solution to solve it. In order to name the problem one must be well-informed and aware of race, culture, and history. It isn't difficult to look in a method book and decide that an illustration depicting black-face is wrong. It isn't difficult to use explicit language rather than sugar-coating a dense topic. It isn't difficult to start a conversation about a problem obvious in all parts of society, not just music. It isn't difficult to include culturally diverse music in classrooms and give that music context. It isn't difficult. So why is it acceptable for elementary music educators to blatantly use racist content when there are anti-racist options at their fingertips?

References

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