



ORCHESTRA

Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Orchestra Classroom

by Sarah Duffy

Many school districts are incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices into their professional development activities. As is often the case in building-wide training sessions, orchestra teachers may be wondering, “How does this apply to my classroom?”

The purpose of this article will be to explore culturally responsive teaching strategies, especially those related to classroom management, and how they can be successfully incorporated into the orchestra classroom. This article is extracted from a larger report completed for a research course at the University of St. Thomas in the winter of 2018.

Culturally Responsive Teaching Defined

“Culturally responsive teaching [CRT] is an approach to teaching that considers the role of culture in every aspect of teaching and learning so that student learning is made more relevant, meaningful, and effective” (Abril, 2013). CRT is focused on creating partnerships with students and engaging them in their learning at the deepest level possible. “Culturally responsive teaching helps move the attention from the *things* we teach to the *children* [emphasis added] we teach and the social learning environment where music experiences occur” (Abril, 2013).

CRT is sometimes challenging to implement in the traditional music classroom because there is a long history of teacher control in this environment, and there aren’t many role models for a different approach. “As a profession, we have a long history of ‘teacher control.’ ...For many years, our image of a good music teacher was one who could get students to make music the way he or she wanted them to with the smallest number of verbal instructions.” ...Music educators have very few professional models who demonstrate a more equitable style of teaching” (Wiggins as cited in Gurgel, 2015).

Releasing control and allowing for more of a voice from the students may feel uncomfortable at first, but it will increase student engagement in the long run. “[Jackie Wiggins] noted that viewing uncertainty and spontaneity as a valuable part of classroom life will help teachers move away from searching for means to retain control over their students and the environment and more toward seeking how they can identify and meet the needs of their students” (Shaw, 2012).

Discussions from Facebook

In order to discover some “real life” examples from the world of orchestra teaching, I searched for “classroom management,” “responsive teaching,” and “culturally responsive” within the School Orchestra and String Teachers Facebook group. I then organized the responses that fit into the general themes of culturally responsive teaching. The teachers quoted below graciously allowed their comments to be shared anonymously in this article.

In one of the discussions, a teacher asks for help with classroom management in an urban classroom with 80% of the students on free/reduced lunch. A response that is indicative of CRT is as follows:

I dealt with behavior issues my first year of teaching. 70% of my students are free/reduced but HONESTLY that is irrelevant to their behavior. Middle class & Rich kids also act out. That is a pedestal for me because sometimes we don’t realize how our perception of our students can hinder or lessen our expectations for good behavior. ANY student has the ability to behave as long as your expectations are clear, firm, and your class is enjoyable...Are you teaching traditionally? Most students these days are divergent learners. These learners need to be moving, and they desperately need differentiation. I think the days of traditional string teaching are fading away (personal communication, September 19, 2014).

Another response suggested honoring the culture of the students through music selection:

Also, remember to honor the music and culture they come from...if you’re mainly working music that comes from a different culture, consider adding in more folk or ethnic music so that you’re teaching the same concepts, but with more familiar music. I had the best buy-in in a class of 4th grade Title I kids when I worked mariachi music as opposed to Twinkle Twinkle. *Sound Innovations* allows you to adapt the tunes to your preference, keeping the same key concepts... might check that out? (personal communication, September 19, 2014).

Another teacher asked for feedback on the book *Classroom Management in the Music Room: “Pin-Drop Quiet” Classes and Rehearsals* by David Newell. One teacher provided a response that sums up nicely the difference between responsive teaching and a more compliance-based model of classroom management:

I was initially intrigued by the author’s ideas regarding classroom management and discipline, but ultimately felt that the suggested practices fit better in a compliancy-based model of teaching (and in my opinion, an outdated model at that). I think contemporary teachers/administrators are more comfortable seeing the “messy” parts of learning these days, rather than classroom instruction that is solely teacher-directed. Of course discipline and order is important in the context of daily rehearsal (for everyone’s sake), but I am more interested in a balance of teacher/student dialogue.

I’m also more interested in HOW students are responding to instruction and if they are engaged in the music-making process. *Students can be silent and obedient, but that says nothing about their learning and participation in the overall rehearsal.* [emphasis added]

The author does suggest an important idea though—teachers have a right to teach and students have a right to learn. Anything that interferes with this process is harmful to the classroom environment. The question is how to make students aware of this and involve them, without damaging relationships

through punitive action. (personal communication, July 9, 2015)

A first-year teacher asked about “reasonable and effective consequences” for a chatty 7th grade orchestra class. She worried that too much time was being wasted by students talking out of turn and plucking their instruments during instruction. A veteran teacher responded with an example of CRT classroom management:

Keep things moving! Time management is the key to productive, interesting and fun rehearsals. Don't let there be any down time. Have a plan and always be thinking ahead. When you talk to the group, be sure you are talking in an assertive voice and you are addressing everyone, not just the ones nearest the front. Keep the pace moving. Interject humor. Be animated when you speak, but try to speak as little as possible.

They should be playing as much through the rehearsal as possible. Speak and make corrections while they're playing when you can. If you seem to be having fun, so will they!

Important: Be positive and remember: They are middle school kids and not mini adults. There's always going to be some plucking and talking out of turn but you can minimize it by using my suggestions. Whatever you do, don't make it too dreary or negative by having too many punishments or retributions for these misbehaviors. It will be a huge turn off and you may see students begin to drop out of your program. Keep it positive, well structured, fast paced and fun! (personal communication, February 18, 2016).

In another discussion, there was a teacher looking for classroom management tricks to help manage her spirited classroom. One response emphasized the CRT value of strong teacher/student relationships:

Folks here are outlining some good tricks. What I have to offer is not really a trick, but when I had a challenging group the way I got the kids to observe good classroom behavior was by...for better or worse...getting them to like me. For some students in tough situations, just showing you care will go further than any tricks. Not to say the tricks aren't needed—but getting them on board with YOU will be what gets you to the next point. Also modeling good behavior, getting them excited, and also demonstrating that they need YOU in order to enjoy their time more fully (after all, they undoubtedly are hoping to have some fun...hence the spirited) (personal communication, August 28, 2012).

Another teacher commented on the importance of consistent expectations:

The thing I've started doing that helps the most is I constantly reteach my expectations. If a kid starts talking out in class I'll ask them to explain what expectation they're not following, what they should be doing instead, and why we have that expectation. They will roll their eyes and huff and puff, but I get more results from that than from ultimatums and ever-increasing consequences. If the whole class is out of hand, I'll have them start over and pretend it's the first day of class (personal communication, August 28, 2012).

In yet another discussion, a teacher was looking for classroom management ideas for a challenging high school ensemble. One teacher responded with a classic CRT framework—are you self-reflecting, are you properly engaging the students, do they all understand the

“rules” of the game, and, most importantly, do they care about you and do they know that you care about them?

And then look inward. Are your concert cycles and rehearsals structured so that your students are engaged and performing in the “zone of cognitive flow”? If not, what's wrong? Is your music too easy or too difficult? Is your pacing too fast or too slow? Are the rules of the game set up so the players can understand how their choices create outcomes? ...

I am a firm believer in constructionist educational philosophy, but you can't teach using constructionist methodology if there are behavioral problems. Behavior problems require behavioral modification strategies.

In the days of tall ships, they usually only had to shoot one mutineer, as long as they were willing to shoot the other mutineers for the good of the ship.

But going into battle, you need a crew that serves for love of the ship, love of the captain, and love of flag and country. They can't be operating out of fear. Making music is like that. (personal communication, October 17, 2014).

Another blog post that provided examples of culturally responsive teaching in the orchestra classroom was written by Harry and Rosemary Wong, the authors of *The First Days of School: How to be an Effective Teacher*. They observed an orchestra teacher who implemented the strategies they outline in their book. They mention her high level of organization and how it helps keep the students on track:

Through her high level of organization, Nile treats her students with the same respect that a professional conductor would treat an orchestra. Her students love music and love learning. They are successful because they always know what to do, how to do it, and when to do it.

They also noted the importance of establishing procedures so everyone can achieve their full potential:

How you conduct your classroom will determine the level of your success and your students' success. It is now two to three months into the school year. Is your classroom organized so the students have time to learn? You were hired to teach. And if you spend most of your time correcting, disciplining, and scolding students, we suspect you lack procedures so your students know what to do.

Every orchestra is filled with talented musicians playing diverse instruments. But it takes a conductor to synchronize the notes coming from those instruments to create the beautiful music for an audience to enjoy.

Every child in your classroom has potential. Become the conductor for your students and orchestrate the beautiful music to fill your classroom. You'll hear engagement sounding from your students. Your classroom will hum with learning.

Survey

As another part of my research, I conducted a small survey regarding the use of CRT strategies in the orchestra classroom. A group of teachers graciously shared some insights that would be considered culturally responsive. They all mentioned the importance of relationships with students, creating high expectations, and honoring the background and experiences of their students.

The teachers with less CRT training were more likely to focus on student actions—how students are sitting, what are they doing,

what materials do they have with them, etc.—and the teachers with more CRT training tended to focus on what the students are thinking.

Conclusion

Culturally responsive teaching is an effective way to meet the needs of our students while breathing fresh life into our practice as educators. The expectations and experiences of our students have changed, and we need to change along with them.

Additional Reading

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