Chapter 9
The Music Educator’s Unique Sphere of Influence: Culturally Responsive Approaches for Music Education

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ABSTRACT

Music educators often teach every child in school. This is especially true in elementary settings and often true in K-12 school settings. In addition, they teach students for many years. As a result, they can play a critical role in their students’ personal as well as educational development. This chapter provides an overview of culturally responsive practices related to several areas including critical race theory, restorative justice, racism, challenges in music education, pre-service teacher development, changing schools, and data from the author’s previously unpublished study on pre-service educator views. In addition, this chapter provides suggested actions that music teacher educators must embrace to help develop the most responsive music educators.

INTRODUCTION

Educators are called to teach. More than that, each is called to a positive, driving force, accepting of all students with their unique strengths and personalities. Music educators have unique challenges. Often, they teach the same students over several
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years. If they teach in a traditional elementary school, they teach students every week from pre-kindergarten through grade 5 or 6. In some cases, a music educator will teach all grade levels, every week, sometimes multiple times a week, from pre-kindergarten through grade 12. While some may see this as potentially overwhelming (because of numbers of students), the reality is that most music educators chose their career because they love music, they love teaching, and they want the educational connection with students over several years.

Preparing educators to teach all grade levels means college and university music educator preparation programs are charged with preparing pre-service educators to be (a) competent musicians, often in both voice and on an instrument, (b) competent educators who understand and can apply child and adolescent development, music learning standards, and music learning benchmarks for every grade level, and (c) compassionate and caring individuals who can safely and positively interact with every level of learner while also embracing each child’s individuality. This is a daunting task, to be sure. But, each year, students graduate from colleges and universities excited and motivated to fulfill their dreams and desires to teach music. A goal of music teacher preparation is to help support their excitement while helping them become competent and effective music educators for all students.

This purpose of this chapter is to provide relevant background in culturally responsive practices, and to focus on how music educators at all levels (PreK-College) can embrace culturally responsive teaching in ways positively influence their students’ lives. While many are called to teach music, educators are also called to be responsive to students’ identities, cultures, and backgrounds so they meet educational, acceptance, and personal developmental needs of every student.

BACKGROUND

Before continuing, it is valuable to define a few important concepts. This section defines culturally responsive teaching through culture, responsive teaching and then describes Ladson-Billings’ (1990, 1994) view. In addition, important background information on challenges in music education, pre-service teacher development, making changes in schools, and data from the author’s previously unpublished study on pre-service educator views.

What is Culture?

The American Psychological Association’s (APA) Task Force on Re-envisioning the Multicultural Guidelines for the 21st Century defined several key terms and concepts, including culture. Their definition of culture is: “Belief systems and value
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