

Privileging Culture through Incorporating Folk Music in the General Elementary Classroom: Implications for Teacher Education

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue for the integration of folk music from children's home cultures in the general elementary classroom as a means to privilege culture. I argue that this approach to general elementary education should be incorporated into teacher training programs. While many teacher education programs presently overlook the integration of folk music from various cultures, this approach has the potential to become a valuable component of teacher education. I investigate ways in which teachers can create multiple pathways for learning by privileging the home cultures of children. This can be accomplished through the integration of music instruction that embraces the children's musical "mother tongue" in elementary social studies and language arts curricula. I then explore the implications of training preservice elementary teachers in approaches to privileging culture through music instruction.

Training preservice teachers in approaches to privileging culture through music instruction in the general elementary classroom has the potential to become a valuable component of teacher education. Through privileging the home cultures of children by embracing the children's "musical mother tongue" in elementary classroom instruction, teachers may create multiple pathways for learning that benefit children's social and cognitive development. By receiving training in such approaches, preservice teachers will have alternatives to teaching in the traditional styles that have historically advantaged white and well-to-do students, while disadvantaging students of color and those from low-income families.

Privileging Children's Home Cultures in the Classroom

A number of educational researchers have called for educators to become more aware of cultural differences, valuing student diversity as a factor that enriches the classroom setting (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Lee, 2008; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Nasir, Rosebery, Warren, & Lee, 2006). Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) argue that the "funds of knowledge" (e.g., the historical and cultural knowledge and skills essential to individual or familial functioning and well-being) that exist in families of color or low income comprise a wealth of cultural and cognitive resources. These resources represent great potential for enriching classroom instruction. Through this broadened lens, diversity becomes a pedagogical asset, and the knowledge and strengths that students bring with them to the classroom gain value. Instruction is linked to students' lives, and effective pedagogy is linked to local histories and community contexts (Gonzales et al., 2005; Moll et al., 1992; Nasir et al., 2006).

Moreover, there has been a call for educators to not only recognize the wealth of knowledge that students bring with them to school, but to draw upon that knowledge as an object of classroom inquiry (Gonzales et al., 2005; Lee, 2008; Moll et al., 1992). This requires educators to reject the traditionally assumed opposition between everyday learning, which generally occurs in informal settings, and disciplinary learning, which generally occurs in formal settings. It also requires educators to abandon the notion that everyday learning is less valuable than disciplinary learning. Rather, educators must acknowledge that the everyday knowledge of students has value, can serve as an object of inquiry in the classroom, and can serve as a scaffold to related academic knowledge (Lee, 2008; Nasir et al., 2006).

Valuing the wealth of knowledge that children bring to school from their home culture involves restructuring classrooms to accommodate multiple pathways for learning. It also involves educators abandoning the singular, normative pathway of learning that has historically advantaged white students from well-to-do families (Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003; Nasir et al., 2006). This requires changes in educators' understanding of routine, everyday language, and social practices as well as how these relate to the practices of academic disciplines. Valuing students' everyday knowledge includes engaging students' knowledge as an object of inquiry as well as privileging the linguistic and cultural resources that students bring to school. This provides students with new opportunities to participate in classroom inquiry and to assume meaningful roles in the work of their classrooms (Lee, 2008). Creating multiple pathways for learning requires educators to view learning not only as a cognitive process, but also as a cultural process

that is intertwined with many aspects of development, such as identity and emotion (Lee et al., 2003; Nasir et al., 2006).

Privileging students' home cultures in the classroom creates certain caveats. As Ladson-Billings (1998) and Sleeter and Bernal (2004) have noted, multicultural education is easily reduced to superficial, trivial celebrations of "diversity." Therefore, the process of privileging students' home cultures must be informed by a comprehensive understanding of culture. A comprehensive understanding of a culture considers the history, politics, and socioeconomic conditions that shape cultural knowledge, identity, and formation. An essentializing view of culture that reduces it to "the three F's" – food, fun, and festivals – potentially reinforces structures of oppression, power, and domination rather than challenging those structures (Duesterberg, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994). It is essential for white, middle class teachers to acknowledge how many representations of other cultures in America are filtered through a white, middle class lens (Duesterberg, 1998). If educators fail to acknowledge these often skewed representations of other cultures, they run the risk of erasing the "Other" (hooks, 1990).

Privileging Culture in the General Elementary Classroom through Music Instruction

Teachers may honor student diversity and culture in the general elementary classroom by incorporating folk music and children's songs of the students' home cultures into the classroom. Music from student's home cultures will hereafter be referred to as folk music. The Hungarian music educator Zoltán Kodály advocated the use of folk music in schools, referring to folk music of a child's home culture as the child's "musical mother tongue" (Choksy, 1988). Folk music often evokes in the singer or listener a sense of

belonging to something greater than oneself: to family, to a community, to one's people and culture (Davis, 2005; Kvideland, 1989). Thus, folk music can encourage a sense of identity based on one's cultural and musical heritage. The incorporation of folk music in the elementary classroom helps to establish an atmosphere conducive to privileging students' cultural and musical traditions and resources.

The cultivation of multiple pathways to learning challenges notions of a singular, normative pathway to learning. The use of folk music from students' home cultures in the classroom challenges the supposed superiority of the music traditionally used for musical instruction in both elementary music and general elementary classrooms (Anderson & Campbell, 1989; Davis, 2005; Johnson, 2004; Teicher, 1997). Using folk music also rejects the implied assumption that folk music traditions are somehow deficient in nature (Davis, 2005; Johnson, 2004). In such an instructional environment, children are able to see the value and integrity of his or her own musical and cultural traditions. It also helps to prevent educators from implying that those cultural traditions are in some way deficient (Teicher, 1997).

Privileging students' home cultures in an effective manner has two essential requirements. First, the general elementary classroom teacher must seek to privilege the linguistic, cultural, and musical resources children bring with them from home. Lee (2008) argues, "Ways of speaking in classrooms that privilege language resources that students bring from their everyday linguistic practices and repertoires outside school create opportunities for participation and the assumption of meaningful roles in the problem-solving and inquiry work of classrooms" (p. 275). In much the same manner, ways of singing in classrooms that privilege the musical resources that students bring from their

everyday singing practices and musical repertoires from outside school create opportunities for students to participate in meaningful ways in the work of their classrooms.

Second, the general elementary classroom teacher must seek to create multiple pathways for learning and development through the incorporation of folk music. This requires a willingness to challenge the traditional notion that children must learn through singular, normative pathways as well as an understanding of the ways in which students' everyday musical and cultural practices intersect with important academic knowledge (Lee, 2008; Nasir et al., 2006). Meaningful incorporation of folk music in the elementary general classroom requires recognition of the wealth of linguistic, cultural, and musical knowledge that students bring with them to school. The elementary classroom teacher must also draw upon that knowledge as an object of classroom inquiry.

Incorporating folk music in the elementary classroom is of vital importance to privileging students' home cultures. It requires the general elementary classroom teacher to seek to privilege students' linguistic, cultural, and musical resources and to create multiple pathways for learning and development. They must also be able to recognize ways in which students' cultural and musical resources intersect with academic learning. The following are specific ways in which students' everyday musical and cultural practices can intersect with academic learning in the elementary social studies and language arts. Also included are ways in which educators might privilege the musical resources that students bring from their everyday singing practices and musical repertoires. By doing so, educators create opportunities for students to participate in meaningful ways in the work of the classroom.

Intersections: Everyday Musical and Cultural Practices with Academic Knowledge

Students' everyday musical and cultural resources provide a wealth of cultural and cognitive resources. These resources have great potential for enriching classroom instruction in a manner that privileges students' home cultures. This section highlights ways in which general elementary classroom teachers may draw upon the linguistic, cultural, and musical knowledge that students bring with them to school, invite that knowledge as an object of inquiry in the classroom, and use it as a scaffold to relevant or related academic knowledge. Educators may foster intersections of students' everyday knowledge with academic learning in any number of disciplines. For example, Bob Moses' work examines the intersections of disciplinary knowledge in mathematics with students' everyday knowledge (Moses & Cobb, 2001). This section focuses on the intersections of students' everyday knowledge with academic learning in the social studies and language arts.

Intersections of Everyday Knowledge and the Social Studies

Students' everyday musical and cultural knowledge can intersect with important disciplinary learning in the social studies in a number of ways. Their musical and cultural knowledge can serve as an object of inquiry and as a scaffold to academic knowledge in the social studies. For example, the musical traditions of the Mexican celebration of Dia de los Muertos can serve as a springboard to study of the cultural traditions that have come to define Dia de los Muertos. One elementary teacher learned a song known as "El Reloj" (also known as "Los Esqueletos") from her Mexican-American students, who

taught her that the song is traditionally sung at the celebration of Dia de los Muertos (Andrews, 2010). In this song, skeletons come to life on Dia de los Muertos and complete various actions at each hour of the day: *Cuando el reloj marque la una/Los esqueletos salen de su tumba/Tumba, que tumba, que tumba, tumba, tumba*. [When the clock shows one, the skeletons come out of their tombs] (Los, 2011). The teacher then used “El Reloj” as a scaffold to a discussion about the significance of skeletons, which represent deceased relatives and friends in the cultural rituals of Dia de los Muertos (Andrews, 2010).

African-American spirituals, familiar to many American students, serve as a rich resource for the study of history and culture. For example, the spiritual “Follow the Drinkin’ Gourd” is one of many songs that provided inspiration to slaves seeking freedom. This song deals with the path to freedom by explaining how to follow the Big Dipper and the North Star northward to freedom (Follow, 2011). Some students may have everyday knowledge connected to this song through ancestors who, in hearing this very song or other spirituals, were given courage to escape slavery. In the classroom, “Follow the Drinkin’ Gourd” can serve as a springboard to discussion and study of the Underground Railroad.

In the Jewish tradition, Chanukah, “The Festival of Lights,” is celebrated with rich, religious, symbolic acts such as lighting a menorah and singing songs commemorating the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian-Greeks around 165 BCE. One tradition in families with children is the giving of dreidels as gifts. The dreidel is a small top with four sides, each side bearing one of the following Hebrew letters: Nun, Gimel, Hay, and Pay. The letters stand for the Hebrew phrase “Nes Gadol Hayah Po,” meaning “a great miracle happened here.” At the celebration of Chanukah, children play a traditional Hebrew game

using the dreidel while learning the significance of the Hebrew letters it bears and the history it represents. In the early 20th century, a Jewish American named Samuel Goldfarb wrote “My Dreidel,” a song that children often sing today at the celebration of Chanukah as they play the dreidel game (My Dreidel, 2011). Jewish students may have personal family stories, experiences with the dreidel game, and songs to contribute to a lesson involving this song. The teacher may then use the students’ knowledge as a scaffold to the study of traditional winter celebrations and world history. This serves as yet another example of how students’ everyday musical and cultural knowledge may intersect with academic knowledge in the social studies.

Intersections of Everyday Knowledge and Language Arts

Children’s cultural and musical traditions can also be a rich resource for the study of elementary language arts. Many songs children sing or chant in the course of their daily lives can serve as a springboard to the study of poetry, such as studying rhyme scheme or meter. One chant that many Latino/a children may be familiar with is “Bate, Bate, Chocolate,” a rhyme about stirring hot chocolate: *Bate, bate, chocolate/Con arroz y con tomate/Uno, dos, tres, CHO/uno, dos, tres, CO/uno, dos, tres, LA/uno, dos, tres, TE/Chocolate, chocolate, chocolate, chocolate* (Bate, 2011). This particular chant could aid in learning to identify rhyming words and rhyme scheme, focusing on the rhyming words *bate, chocolate, and tomate*. This chant can also aid in the study of meter, as the words of this song are an excellent example of trochaic meter. Students may be able to share other songs and rhymes they have learned from their families that will lend themselves just as effectively to the study of rhyme, meter, and other aspects of poetry.

Many folk songs can serve as scaffolds to the study of figurative language. One such song is the Appalachian folk song “Old Joe Clark,” which is filled with humorous examples of hyperbole: *Old Joe Clark he had a house/Fifteen stories high/Every room that I’ve been in/Was filled with chicken pie* (Old, 2011). The African American spiritual “Study War No More” (also known as “Down by the Riverside”) contains powerful examples of imagery and metaphor: *I’m gonna lay down my sword and shield/Down by the riverside... I ain’t gonna study war no more* (Down, 2011). Here we see the imagery of putting down one’s sword and shield beside the river as a metaphor for nonviolent resistance (Jones, 2005). As with previous examples, students may be able to share folk songs they have learned from their own families and cultural traditions that provide other examples of figurative language, thus bridging students’ everyday knowledge with important disciplinary knowledge in the language arts.

Implications for Teacher Education

Hands-on experience in lesson planning and classroom implementation is vital for preservice general elementary teachers to be able to authentically and effectively integrate folk music from students’ home cultures into the elementary general curriculum (Teicher, 1997). There are a number of steps that preservice teacher training programs may take to establish programs that offer preservice teachers such experiences. First, it may be more effective to present such training with a focus on integrating music in the general elementary curriculum rather than teach music as a discipline. Many preservice teachers are not comfortable with the prospect of teaching music in the elementary general classroom. Many believe that music should be taught by a specialist and disagree that

general classroom teachers should be able to teach music. However, they generally support the integration of music into the general elementary curriculum and believe that it is important for them to do so in their own classrooms (Hash, 2010). The use of compact disc or MP3 recordings of folk songs to accompany class singing may help elementary generalists feel more comfortable with the integration of folk music. Another option is to occasionally bring in parents or members of the community who can lead the class in singing folk music, perhaps accompanying the singing on guitar or piano. For elementary generalists who may not be comfortable with their own singing voices and may not play an instrument, options such as these remove from them the onus for leading singing and providing musical accompaniment.

Second, it is important to emphasize throughout preservice training that the incorporation of folk music should not be relegated to occasional use for cultural holidays or festivals, such as Cinco de Mayo or Kwanzaa (Legette, 2003). As Banks (1997) emphasized, teachers implement multicultural education most authentically and effectively when they integrate it into the curriculum regularly throughout the school year. Thus, training programs should emphasize avoiding the “three F’s syndrome” and stress the authentic and effective incorporation of folk music from children’s home cultures on a daily basis throughout the yearlong curriculum (Duesterberg, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Legette, 2003). Furthermore, preservice teachers must be provided with hands-on experience in planning lessons and classroom implementation of activities that incorporate authentic experiences with folk music from students’ home cultures (Teicher, 1997).

There are at least two options through which preservice teacher education programs could offer hands-on training in folk music integration. Training could be

offered as part of existing elementary music methods courses. Training could also be incorporated into courses on multicultural education as well as methods courses in other disciplines, particularly in the social studies and language arts. Incorporating training into courses on multicultural education provides preservice teachers with the best chance of attaining the necessary cultural and musical competency for effective multicultural education. Banks (1997) emphasized the need to integrate multicultural education throughout the curriculum on a daily basis throughout the school year. Similarly, preservice teachers need multicultural education training throughout their teacher preparation experience. Teicher (1997) noted that attaining the necessary cultural and musical competency to effectively integrate multicultural music education takes time. It cannot necessarily be achieved during a one-semester elementary music methods class. This calls for reconsideration of the way American institutions currently structure preservice teacher education programs with the tendency to compartmentalize the disciplines in methods courses. Training preservice teachers to incorporate folk music across the curriculum may require an interdisciplinary approach with music education professors providing support to professors of elementary methods and multicultural education courses.

Although the creation of programs that effectively train preservice teachers in the integration of folk music from students' home cultures may prove a challenge, it is well worth the effort. Through such training, preservice teachers gain alternatives to teaching in traditional singular, normative pathways of instruction. Preservice teachers will gain increased sensitivity to cultural differences, further capacity for valuing diversity as an enhancement to the classroom dynamic, and the ability to privilege students' home culture

in the classroom, thus providing space for the enrichment found in the cultural and musical resources that children bring to school.

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