

MAKING STRING EDUCATION CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE: THE MUSICAL LIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

I started teaching violin at Lincoln Elementary School in north-central Florida in October 2003. When one of my professors at the University offered me the possibility to assist the violin program there, I was excited, despite the fact that I had very little knowledge of teaching violin to very young children. Eager to prepare myself for the experience, I read some fundamental writings on the Suzuki teaching method and began studying basic ideas on how to incorporate his teaching methods. Finally, my teaching discovery started. I met with approximately twenty-five students for two days a week as part of Lincoln Elementary's widely-lauded magnet arts program (which, in addition to string music instruction, includes dance, drum, and drama). Gaining a better understanding of the Suzuki teaching procedure, and having more practice, my focus began to change from my professional concerns (skill- and outcome-based interactions) to the quality of the relationship between my students and me. I became more interested in who my students were, where they came from, and what studying violin meant to them. I wanted to learn more about *them*. Unfortunately, by December 2003, some moved away from town and never returned to Lincoln. Later, I learned that this was a common situation. In search of steady employment to pay the bills and put food on the table, their parents had to move away to find jobs. After watching more and more students move away, I decided to collect more information about them, focusing on these two questions: what are their life conditions, especially in relation to how they perceive and process their musical lives, and how do these perceptions and processes affect their violin experience at school?

My purpose in this qualitative study was to understand and explain the violin experiences of African American students at Lincoln Elementary School in north-central Florida as a way to consider the potential for culturally responsive string education. I used a hermeneutical approach to answer these broad research questions: (1) What are the personal musical lives of these African

American children? (2) How do these children perceive the violin program at Lincoln? These helped to answer the study's overall research questions: how do the individual perceptions of the violin program and the sociocultural musical backgrounds of these students interact and what is created through that interaction?

For the present study, a particular type of qualitative research called the "hermeneutical study" was used because it is closely tied to the reflexive and interpretive approach, appropriate here owing to the dynamic dialogue undertaken by researcher and participants through extensive face-to-face interviews. Hermeneutical research requires constant reflection on the roles (and how they change over time) assumed by researcher and participants. Qualitative researchers believe that all research includes and is driven by an interpreter (for example, researcher and/or participants). Even though the main interpreter of the research is the researcher, participants are in a sense co-researchers who actively participate in and dynamically shape the research process. If it is necessary to place a text in its context to understand it, then the context should naturally also include the author(s) of the work. Authors (in this case, the researcher and interview participants) therefore cannot be seen in isolation. They need to be placed in their own social context, which can be further broadened to their whole historical background. In the current study, the "whole historical background" refers to the African American experience in America, especially from the Civil Rights Movement forward and its impact on education, and my own background in Istanbul, Turkey. This analytical approach resembles the "structural approach" used in literary criticism, where experiences and impressions beyond the surface of the text are considered.

The hermeneutical approach also takes into account the cyclical nature of the research process. Even though the hermeneutical approach and cycle will be explained in detail in the dissertation, it is important to make it clear how this research process will be cyclical. In hermeneutical understanding, an inquirer cannot understand the whole (a text, an experience, or an action) without grasping the individual parts of the whole, and it is necessary for an inquirer to understand each individual part to grasp the whole (Schwandt, 2000). As the researcher, I have a

certain pre-understanding of this research: its questions, its participants, and some literature related to the study. Throughout the research process (reviewing the relevant literature and conducting the interviews), I constantly engaged in interpretation. This process of discovery helped me build new understandings about the relevant research and questions, and therefore revise older notions. The revision-oriented, reflective nature of the undertaking represents another way of thinking about the cyclical nature of the work.

The researcher remained cognizant of power issues during the data collection process and tries to understand the underlying meanings of all activities and reflect on them critically. Sometimes these reflections and interpretations might appear in the form of critiques of history, politics, schooling, and dominant systems and their relations to music education. In hermeneutical inquiry, understanding is “participative, conversational, and dialogic. It is always bound up with language and is achieved only through logic of question and answer,” and, it should be added, occurs in a cyclic process of understanding (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195). In addition, understanding is produced in a dialogue that is not merely discovered and reproduced by the interpreter through analysis; it is a shared, “real-time” discovery.

Significance of the Study

Despite the extensive research on multicultural music education and integration of the musics of underrepresented cultures into the music curriculum, research focused on the pedagogy of culturally responsive music teaching is limited in the literature. For instance, I found no research focused exclusively on the experience of African American children in string programs. Therefore, we do not have data on how African American children’s experience playing string instruments and how the classroom pedagogy is accommodated and teachers’ perspectives are shaped based on the distinct culture of the children. An important objective of this project was to generate discussions among string and music educators to provoke a search for alternative teaching approaches based on the cultural context of the classroom, and to think beyond one-

dimensional understandings of multicultural music education (for example, playing or singing a song from a different culture).

The experiences of minority students (especially African Americans) have been well documented in the music education literature. For instance, successful music teaching and learning in urban classrooms (which are culturally, ethnically, and socio-economically complex environments) have concerned music teachers because the materials, teaching techniques, and philosophical perspectives with which they were equipped to teach music generally do not prepare them for unfamiliar or culturally different music classrooms. The review of literature especially addresses the paucity of culturally diverse pedagogies in music graduate schools.

Three questions that I confront in this study focus these concerns: Are there culturally defined and constructed ways and styles of learning in music? Why is there a need for culturally responsive teaching in music education? Can culturally responsive music teaching (vocal/instrumental/general) affect learning and instruction? The questions that drive this study have concerned scholars for decades, but can best be confronted in the context of the children's specific music experiences in and out of the classroom as conveyed in their own narratives.

This study contributes to research on string education, and examines its role in an African American elementary school. Qualitative researchers are not concerned with the generalizability of their results; instead, they are concerned with comparability and translatability (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Therefore, the results of this research might be applicable and transferable to similar school environments and string classrooms that share similar characteristics with the phenomenon and groups studied—predominately non-white classrooms.

Methodology

The participants in this study were selected using the purposive sampling method based on their status as “violin majors” in the program and through their willingness to participate. In this study, all of the participants were African American students who were violin majors at Lincoln Elementary.

A semi-structured interview (Kvale, 1996) was used to understand the violin experience of these African American students. The interview guide contains two sections that pertain to two dimensions of the children's musical lives: (1) musical background and (2) experience with the violin. Each section contains carefully prepared sequential questions. The questions helped the researcher uncover the details of the children's musical lives and laid the groundwork for an analysis of how their experiences with and perceptions of violin at Lincoln interact with their other—non-violin, non-academic—experiences. Because my participants were young children, I collected the data during an activity time to reduce the artificiality of the interview. For instance, I provided a quiet room and a violin to create a natural context for the interview, and I embedded the interviews into regular violin activities. Eder and Fingerson (2003) suggest that the naturalness of the interview context would be better developed if the interview is placed within a larger activity with which the participants are already familiar.

The data were analyzed using Spradley's (1979) four-step "Ethnographic Analysis Model." Although the study is not an ethnographic study, my questions and the students' responses are rich with cultural implications. Listening to and making music are cultural expressions; the classroom is a place of cultural interactions; and education itself—as the literature review argues—is bound up with culture. The main activity in Spradley's (1979) four-step "Ethnographic Analysis Model" is to organize the data into domains of similar events. With the help of the interview data and the terms found in the data, the researcher constructed two detailed taxonomies representing the musical lives and experiences of the violin students.