

Decolonizing Music Education

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Music education (particularly in North America) is still often stuck in the past and needs to be decolonized. One example of this is that the Western European tradition is extremely over-emphasized. Furthermore, Indigenous musical knowledge is rarely approached in a meaningful way. Teachers need to start realizing these issues, researching them, and change the way they teach. Students deserve to know more.

While the Western European tradition is ubiquitous throughout music today, it is not without its flaws and young musicians can still benefit from learning music other ways. For example, “McHale (2013) suggested that such a score-centered approach could be considered analogous to color-blinded teaching” (Bond, 2017 p. 169). Bond’s quote of McHale outlines one large issue with only teaching music through Western European notation: you are limited to the symbols of that notational system. If you wanted to create a sound that does not have a symbol in Western European notation you would have to either write instructions or leave that sound out of the composition. When freed from the constraints of notation, conductors, music makers, band leaders, etc., can focus more on details that would have otherwise been forgotten about. Bond (2017) continues and states that if the objective in a music class is different than “the desired skills of what it means to be a musician in a student’s culture” (p. 169), any skills that the student learns will only be used in school. If a student’s musical culture

at home does not use Western European notation, they are not learning a transferrable skill. If a music teacher engages students by teaching them musical skills that are valued by their culture, not only are they facilitating that skill in class, but the student will be more likely to use it outside of school.

Another benefit of venturing out of music education's Western European 'norms' can be increased participation in music electives. Bond (2017, p. 170) cites two sources (Albert, 2006; Legette, 2003) where they found that in urban areas, if teachers "created courses that aligned with local student interest, offered nontraditional ensembles, and integrated multicultural repertoire" participation in musical electives increased. Connecting with your students and tailoring programs to their needs and desires is clearly a key to engagement. Furthermore, this can help with deeper community engagement as well. If students are excited about something, they will share with the people around them who potentially will ask questions or even participate in the programming.

Often, North American Indigenous music is performed due to pressures on music conductors to be politically correct, instead of from having the belief that it is important and valid (Stone et al., 2018 p. 35). Music educators must take a deep look into the history of Indigenous issues in Canada and share this with their class in order to understand the importance of reconciliation and why Indigenous music (and other non Western European classical musics) should be learned and shared. Glossing over the uncomfortable, difficult, and painful parts of Indigenous people's history will only result in performative allyship. Another thing that music educators often pass over is bringing in Indigenous musicians as clinicians and guides. Collaboration is key to cultivating a respectful relationship with culture-bearers.

Melanie Demore (cited by Stone et al., 2018 p.35) suggest when collaboration with culture bearers is “practiced with sensitivity and respect, collaborating can provide a platform for culture-bearers to share their music and traditions while giving the choir the privilege of learning directly from the source.” This of course translates to band and other music classes, not just choir.

While some music teachers have embraced decolonization, some are defensive and avoidant, while others are just ignorant of the issues at hand. The idea of decolonization of the music room has been gaining traction in recent years, but many music teachers still are not engaging with the ideas. Part of the problem are the curricula across the country. Hess (2015) states “They emphasize Western standard musical notation and specific Western constructs for expressing meter, dynamics and articulations and highlight these elements of music as those musical concepts most essential to learn in schools.”

Hess’s critiques stem from the Ontario music curriculum which is stemmed in Western European hegemony. On the other hand, the Manitoban gr 9-12 music curriculum (while still having elements of the Western European musical tradition) is much more open ended and does not tokenize non-Western European music. One example of the Manitoban music curriculum still bowing to the Western European tradition is that one of the curricular outcomes is “selecting, adapting, manipulating, and combining music elements to communicate meaning and intent” (Manitoba Education, 2015). The issue with this outcome is twofold. One issue is that different students may use different musical elements to convey differing meanings and intents, and some music teachers may enforce their own views onto the

students. The second issue is that for some cultures, music is not meant as a means to communicate any meaning or intent.

The Manitoba music curriculum may be more inclined to a decolonization perspective, but many music teachers choose to ignore it. Throughout my practicum experience, all the music teachers I have learned from have taught exclusively through the Western European tradition. One of my mentor teachers even told me that “there is no curriculum for music class.” Clearly the content of the curriculum is one issue and informing teachers of it and how to use it is another. Part of the issue is that music in University is taught the same way. In Canada most music teachers have been trained in the Western European Classical tradition and that is why they continue to teach that. We need teachers to stand up and break the cycle of musical colonization.

Music is an interesting topic in education due to how closely tied to culture it is. Many Canadian music teachers still only teach music from a Western European perspective and enforce the ideals that come with that. Some teachers are learning and trying to incorporate more Indigenous music in a way that is collaborative and inclusive. Some teachers are stuck in the past and think that there is nothing wrong with the way they are teaching and that needs to change. Teachers need to start decolonizing their music classrooms immediately.

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