



Music - It's Elementary

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A Social Justification for Multicultural-Multiethnic Music Education

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You don't have to search the newspapers very hard to find problems in Oregon with racial slurs, discrimination, unequal opportunities, assaults, murders, and gang warfare. Music education can and should be a powerful force against these manifestations of prejudice and bigotry. Multicultural-multiethnic (MCME) education can reduce these negative behaviors and replace them with cooperation based on understanding and acceptance of other groups within our multi-faceted society. Musical justifications for teaching MCME music have been well detailed in two issues of MEJ (Oct. 1972 and May 1983), so rather than reiterate those arguments, this article focuses on the social justifications of MCME music education.

James A. Banks (1984, p. 9) explains the need for both multicultural and multiethnic education: "Most Americans are socialized within ethnic or cultural enclaves and are ethnically illiterate. Within their communities, people learn primarily about their own cultures and assume that their lifestyles are the legitimate ones and that other cultures are invalid, strange, and different. The school should help students to break out of their cultural enclaves and to broaden their cultural perspectives."

Mead's Symbolic Interactionism

The manner in which MCME music education can help break people out of their cultural enclaves can be explained by the philosophy of George Herbert

Mead: Symbolic Interactionism (Meltzer, 1964). Several important concepts comprise this philosophy. Mead's main thesis is that each individual's idea of reality is determined by interaction with the society (people) around him. Interaction takes place in units which Mead calls **acts**, which consist of three parts: the **gesture** (stimulus), **interpretation**, and **reaction** (response). A gesture can be covert or overt and thus includes thinking (internal action) and doing (external action). Interpretation is the construing of meaning based on past experience. Humans are able to give meaning to experience through their ability to take roles (to take the point of view of something outside themselves). Through interpretations of many social interactions and through sharing interpretations of those around them, individuals build up composite roles which define who they are and what is proper behavior in their social groups. Mead calls this composite role the **generalized other**.

The norms and values of the generalized other are the basic foundations of ethnic diversity. For example, in some Asian societies, public gestures of hugging and other expressions of love are interpreted as improper and result in reactions of societal disapproval. The same gestures in an Italian ethnic group, however, would be interpreted as good and desirable and would result in approval.

Social groups are defined and bonded by a common knowledge base and individuals can and do belong to many different social groups with different knowledge bases. Reference groups are social subgroups which have set themselves apart from others by adopting certain norms and values. Ethnic groups, then, in

terms of symbolic interaction, are reference groups.

Justification of MCME music education in terms of Symbolic Interaction

Banks (1984, p. 20) states that, "ethnic studies seek to help individuals gain greater self-understanding by viewing themselves from the perspectives of other cultures . . . [and] an individual is ethnic to the extent that he or she shares the values, behavioral patterns, and cultural traits of some specific ethnic group." Ethnic values can be transmitted by music, since music is a powerful gesture embodying norms and values of its reference group. When students attend to and perform music from another ethnic group, they are making gestures common to a foreign reference group. By making these gestures, they momentarily take the role of a member of that group to the extent that the gesture engages the attention of their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor intelligences. Students figuratively "walk around in others shoes" for a while. In doing so, they gain a better understanding of others and themselves.

MCME education should not be confined to social studies and history classes because students learn with different domains of intelligence. Schools are to a high degree dominated by and limited to cognitive learning with the linguistics component of intelligence (Gardner, 1984). The social studies (or history) class conveys meaning filtered through linguistics. Because music involves total minded behavior, students go beyond knowing in a verbal sense (the **what** of another reference group learned in a linguistic setting) to feeling in a non-verbal, effective sense (the **why and how**). Music conveys meaning through the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains, and thus can easily and quickly convey complex, abstract meanings that would be very difficult or impossible through the cognitive domain alone. Seeger (1972, p.

107) underscores this point: "The social functions of the two arts [speech and music] are quite different. . . . the sounds of a language usually stand for, mean, refer to, items of attention other than themselves; the sounds of a music, on the other hand, except when they have been long associated with words as in military bugle calls and such, do not stand for, mean, refer to, or represent anything but themselves. Speech represents; music presents.

Tait (1972, p. 88) agrees that "students should also perform and compose in various styles of music to directly experience the thinking processes and framework of the many cultures."

This role taking in a foreign reference group expands the repertoire of gestures and broadens the individual's self-image at a deep psychological level. Given opportunities to participate in enough of these other-reference group roles, the individual will build up a knowledge base and a generalized other of a world citizen. The individual's reference group will broaden to include humanity in general (an amalgamation of many ethicalities), and his understanding of others will deepen. Tait (1972, p. 88) states, "we can frequently gain a better perspective on our attitudes and values if we compare them with others. . . . [Through world musics] students could undoubtedly sense a new reality and a new significance in 'the family of Man'."

The exploration of multicultural music can be organized to include a variety of viewpoints and methods: study of instruments and performance practice, music forms, aesthetic properties, social functions of music in different cultures, musical elements, and notational systems. Differences will be strong, but similarities will also emerge which will help students adopt a common global view of humanity. (Tait, 1972). By increasing students' knowledge of and gesture skills in foreign ethnic reference groups through teaching the social values of ethnic music, negative inter-group behaviors can be reduced and behaviors of cooperation can be reinforced. The goals of multicultural-multiethnic education will be fulfilled.

Banks, J. A. (1984). *Teaching strategies for ethnic studies, Third Edition*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.