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Music That Makes Sense: Creating a Beginner's Piano Book For Inner-City Children

Culturally relevant children's literature is needed, specifically in the area of beginner piano books. The large majority of beginner piano books are geared towards white middle class children, with pictures of white children portrayed with lives of relative affluence. For example, a classic beginner resource, Edna Mae Burnam's Step by Step Piano Course Book One, shows white children swimming in a private swimming pool or buying ice cream in a shiny ice cream parlour (Burnam 1959: 25). Similarly, Alfred's Basic Piano Library, published in 1996, still shows predominantly white children in the corresponding visuals. Both the song themes and visuals accompanying the songs do not relate to non-white children in urban environments. Bastien's Piano Basics, a more modern piano course series from 1985, includes a token 'multicultural' (darker skinned) child in the mix of white children, but this is the only small example of racial diversity found in beginner piano books.

There are some attempts at cultural diversity in some books, but these attempts play off of stereotypes, such as "Mexican Hat Dance," or "Indian Song" about Native American culture. (Alfred's Basic Piano Library 1A). David Carr Glover's piano library (copyright 1967) depicts all humans in bright peach coloring – emphasizing whiteness, and has pictures of a school bus loaded with white kids, or two white kids watching a cowboys and Indians show on TV. (Glover, Primer Level). Bastien Piano Basics may be attempting to be inclusive by often employing cartoon pictures of animals in place of humans. However, the majority of humans shown are white, and in songs like "Arab Dance" the personified picture is of a pig (Bastien 1985: 30). Earlier in the book there is a song about "Ten Little Indians" but the picture shows obviously white children dressed as Native Americans (Bastien 1985:26).

It is important for all children to have equal resources for learning that fit with their lives, yet there is an obvious lack of piano books for children of color, and children in urban settings. With beginner piano books, there is no choice other than the 'white middle class' choice. In the interest of equality, it is important to combat this discrepancy.

The neighborhood studied contains mostly African American and Latino residents (Community Action Commission 2006). Teaching piano lessons to urban children children of color at an afterschool program with piano books written for white middle class students is neither useful nor beneficial. I, the teacher, can teach them musical skills and concepts, but I am not teaching holistically if I do not pay attention to the ideas and pictures that these resources convey (hooks 1994). Studies have shown that urban children, specifically African American children, have a "disconnection and disengagement" with

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education (Murrell 2002: xx), in part because of a lack of resources that cater to their specific culture. In order to teach piano most effectively, and show that learning can be relatable to one's culture, I have gathered data regarding symbols and meanings for urban children. After analyzing the data, I crafted a beginner's piano book that is relevant and forms positive racial identities, following Paulo Freire's theory found in "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." The visuals are directed specifically towards Latino and African American children, and the themes are taken from collected qualitative data.

Literature Review:

When writing an ethnography of inner-city culture, I assume that the low-income urban space is indeed a culture to be studied, separate from dominant American mainstream culture. Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh discusses the practice of categorizing urban spaces for sociological purposes, showing that the urban poor have been set apart as a culture all their own. The "socially isolated urban poor" have often been a topic of sociological studies; "to be sure, participant observation in American sociology has always been a method of exploring daily life, particularly among the marginal, segregated, and otherwise unconventional melange of groups and persons inhabiting urban quarters" (Venkatesh 2003: 5). Venkatesh asserts that the poor do live in "concentrated poverty spaces," and that to an extent, the culture of a place is self-contained in an area within a city.

From a racial perspective, the urban poor are predominantly African American in the United States. Thus, significant research focuses not only on urban culture, but specifically on African American culture within these urban environments. Children are studied within the context of education.

Sociologist Venus Evans-Winters spent three years researching through participant observation in a low-income urban setting to write an ethnography on African American girls, specifically discussing how some African American girls become resilient within oppressive systems. She studies the intersection of race, gender, and class in the context of education, and proposes a framework of critical urban pedagogy – beyond the typical model of mere 'multicultural education.' Some findings from her sample showed that one girl felt that "white teachers at her school are prejudiced against students of color and cannot identify" with her and her peers (Evans-Winters 2005: 86). (The solution of engaging African American students in school cannot be done by merely implementing 'multicultural' literature (Murrell 2002: xx). Multicultural literature is usually "written for white children to expand them culturally – to broaden their thinking and perspective" (Murrell 2002: xx), therefore it does not cater to African American students.) Evans-Winters does not blame race for African Americans lack of connection to education. Instead, she attributes the disconnection to culture, or "how people live day to day" (Evans-Winters 2005: 86). She describes critical urban pedagogy as a model that "takes into consideration the context in which students live, play, and work," while going "even further to understand how these social constructs are produced and sustained by racism" (Evans-Winters 2005: 155) This pedagogy focuses on the strengths of African American students rather than only the reasons for weaknesses. She encourages

teachers to pursue culturally relevant pedagogy by knowing “not only where [their students] live but also how they live” (Evans-Winters 2005: 157).

Teachers should understand the culture of their students, and therefore be able to teach them more effectively. In “But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” Gloria Ladson-Billings discusses the importance of culture being implemented into education. She studies eight teachers considered to be excellent instructors of African American students. Although all the teachers' strategies differ, they are all “culturally relevant teachers” who “utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning” (Ladson-Billings 1995: 4). Similarly, in another study of successful teaching in urban environments, entitled “Representin': Drawing From Hip-Hop and Urban Youth Culture to Inform Teacher Education,” Jason Irizzary shows that implementing relatable urban youth culture into education brings positive results. Irizzary studies the teaching methods of successful urban teachers, finding that these teachers focus primarily on making education culturally relevant. According to Irizzary, successful teachers in urban teaching environments are successful because they “transform the curriculum” and “engage teaching and learning in ways that center the cultures and experiences of the students” (Irizzary 2009: 501). Irizzary also warns against a colorblind approach; it is important to recognize students of color and see the students' culture as a positive source of knowledge.

Minority children need to be affirmed by education that encourages their own cultural and racial identity. Jawanza Kunjufu, an African American psychologist argues that African American children's self-concept is “overwhelming[ly] influence[d]” by the “white dominant society” in America (Kunjufu 1984: 16), and a positive self-image is needed for successful education. In an attempt to encourage positive self-images in African American children, thus helping them excel in academic environments, Kunjufu suggests a change in education curriculum from analytical to relational (Kunjufu 1984: 40). In order to be relational, “effective teachers must be cognizant of the child's culture and learning styles” (Kunjufu 1984: 47). According to Kunjufu, the failure to make learning relevant results in reduced self-esteem. The way to help educational interest in African American urban children is to encourage identity formation. This is done through children's literature written directly for them.

Culturally relevant learning is greatly influenced by the type of literature used. Research shows that literature is important for success; “children's earliest experiences with books and print lay the groundwork for success in school” (McGill-Franzen et al. 2002: 1). However, according to “Learning to be Literate: a Comparison of Five Early Childhood Programs,” three of which “served predominantly low-income, African American families in racially segregated neighborhoods” (McGill-Franzen et al. 2002: 2), poor children and children of color are generally reading less literature, and the literature they do read is less connected to their personal and community identity. Bena Hefflin sets forth “three key theoretical principles” in regard to cultural relevancy in education. First, the literature used needs to “tap into the content of the students' lives by representing accurately and authentically the culture, cultural knowledge, and background they know and live.” Second, the methods must include an acknowledgment of interaction outside of school – in the home and community. Third, a “culturally relevant pedagogy”

must be developed (Hefflin 2002: 222). This is done by using materials “that are imbued with cultural patterns of students' everyday lives” (Hefflin 2002: 233). In other words, education becomes relevant when the culture of the students is implemented into the teaching resources.

Field-site Description:

My field-site was in a specific low-income neighborhood of a small Eastern U.S. city, at an afterschool program. According to the 2000 Census, the population consists of 6,533 persons with “32 percent of the residents living at or below poverty levels” (Community Action Commission 2006). Around 40 percent of the population are under 18. The population is diverse – half of the population is black, 30 percent is white, and 20 percent are other races (Community Action Commission 2006). A quarter of the population identifies as Latino. Half of the city's Spanish speaking population lives in the neighborhood. The neighborhood is quite urban. Around two thirds of the housing units are rented. Streets are lined with 19th Century row houses (livingspaces.com). I observed a high number of abandoned buildings. Unfortunately, homicides, rapes, robberies, and assaults are all frequent within the neighborhood (Community Action Commission 2006).

The After-School program typically has approximately ten to fifteen children daily, from Monday to Thursday, from 3:00 until 5:45 pm. The children range in age from early elementary to high school. Some of the children are related, and some have relatives (mostly grandparents) involved with leadership in the program. They choose to attend the program on their own. Attendance is not mandatory, but for the most part, the same children come regularly.

My role at the afterschool center was that of service learning. Students from my college go to the afterschool program Monday to Thursday every week to tutor children with their homework. I went every Tuesday for ten weeks throughout the Fall 2011 semester. I primarily taught piano lessons to two girls, as well as gave some informal lessons to four other girls. The 'sample selection' of piano students was chosen depending on the children's interest, as well as at the discretion of the program's leaders. Unfortunately the diversity of my sample was limited due to time constraints in how many piano students I could handle. However, I interacted with the rest of the children in the program and the leaders of the program as well, when I was not teaching piano lessons. I was able to do some homework tutoring and observe the after school program in session. By participating generally in the afterschool program, I was able to collect data from non-piano students as well.

Methodology:

I used the method of participant observation, as explained by H. Russell Bernard in “Research Methods of Anthropology.” Participant observation “puts you where the data is and lets you collect data” (Bernard 2006: 344). My method was mostly qualitative – recording symbols, words, meaning, environment, and situations, based on observation. I took notes “about things I [saw] and [heard] in natural settings” (Bernard 2006: 344), within the environment of the after-school program. Since my presence was weekly occurrence, I was accepted and not considered a disruption to normal life. I established the most rapport with my individual piano students, learning the most detail about culture

from the two piano students that I interacted with on a one on one basis each week. These students provided the most detailed data for my analysis. They volunteered information about their culture, and I also learned by observing them and asking questions in a conversational setting. I also often observed general group activities from the back of the room, with little participation. I also spent considerable time sitting with the children and participating in conversation. Visiting with the leaders of the program also contributed to my participant observation. My rapport with them grew throughout the course of the semester. I recorded my observations by writing them in a notebook after leaving the after-school program. Recording on-site would have been distracting and strange considering the context.

Besides taking general notes of my observations, I analyzed some classic beginner piano books (specifically Book One from Edna Mae Burnam's Step by Step Piano Course, Lesson Book Level 1A from Alfred's Basic Piano Library and the Primer Level David Carr Glover's Piano Library). I chose these books because they represent quality piano instruction, they range in publication from 1959 to 1996, yet none of the books are culturally adequate. I made list of cultural symbols found in the images and themes of the songs in the piano books that could potentially be foreign to urban children. I then looked for the corresponding 'equivalent' symbols and themes, according to observations in my fieldwork. I included as much field observation as possible into my analysis for the culminating piano book. For confidential reasons, I changed the names of the children from whom I collected data.

Theory:

I intersect symbolic interactionism theory with critical pedagogy/education as liberation theory to conduct my analysis of my data. I used the theory of symbolic interactionism to determine which data to collect during participant observation. I then used these symbols to construct a piano book based on the theory of Paulo Friere, regarding education as liberation from oppression.

Symbolic interactionism is a theory named by Herbert Blumer, but largely based on the preceding ideas of George Herbert Mead. In his book, "Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method," Blumer writes of three premises that define the theory. The first perspective is that "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them" (Blumer 1969: 2). The second premise is that this meaning comes from social interaction between humans. The third premise states that these meanings are interpreted by the individual (Blumer 1969: 2). I used this theory to understand meaning placed on things in the culture I studied. By being a participant observer, I observed social interaction, and therefore saw where the meaning comes from. I observed in individuals "the process of interpretation" (Blumer 1969: 5), regarding objects and their meaning. Symbolic interactionism assumes that the world is made up of 'objects' – these objects are grouped into three categories; physical, social, and abstract (Blumer 1969: 10). This sums up the 'environment' of an individual. I sought to understand what some main 'objects' are for my students, and implement these into the piano book.

With data collected on the 'symbols' the culture, I used the theory of "education as liberation," as introduced by Paulo Friere, a Brazilian theorist on education, to form reasoning and a formula for creating a new piano book. Freire applied his theory to teaching illiterate peasants how to read, however his quest for an "education of liberation" can be applied to my piano students as well. In his book, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" Friere expands on Marxist class analysis, distinguishing two groups: the oppressed and

the oppressors. He defines oppression as “any situation in which “A” objectively exploits “B” or hinders his pursuit of self-affirmation” (Freire 1971: 40). I consider the children studied as the oppressed, because their “pursuit of self-affirmation” is hindered if they are taught out of traditional piano books. These books do not affirm their culture or specifically their skin color, therefore the books are oppressive.

In connection with symbolic interactionism, Freire affirms that if pedagogy of the oppressed is conducted well, it “makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed” (Freire 1971: 33). In other words, the oppressed recognize the symbols or objects that are oppressing them, and rise above them, experiencing a process of liberation by creating their unique alternative objects within their context. However, this is impossible when “they live in the duality in which to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor” (Freire 1971: 33). This describes the effect of using traditional piano books on urban children; if they only learn from symbols of the oppressor, they will not learn to “exist authentically” (Freire 1971: 32).

I implement this theory of education as a practice of freedom by creating a book that is not from the point of view of 'the oppressor,' rather from the perspective of the oppressed. In the creation of the piano book, I incorporate symbols and relevant visuals to encourage empowerment of 'the oppressed' – in this case, urban minority children.

Analysis:

Alternative Symbols:

When doing participant observation in my fieldwork, I organized my data into symbols that seemed different from dominant American culture. I defined dominant American culture by the symbols gleaned from traditional piano books. After listing some of these 'dominant American cultural symbols,' I used real life examples (all from data collected from participant observation at my field-site) to construct 'alternative cultural symbol' in the urban neighborhood studied. I allowed a loose formula for finding 'alternatives,' rather than merely 'opposites,' so that I could use as many specific examples as possible. The analysis is shown in the chart below:

Themes:	Dominant American Cultural Symbols	Alternative Cultural Symbols In Urban Neighborhood
Parents/ Guardians:	White mom wearing nice dress and jewellery (Burnam, Book One)	Ruth's mother wearing tight jeans, hoop earrings, large sweatshirt, makeup often the grandmother is the primary caregiver
	White father in suit, singing with mother (Burnam, Book One)	In most cases no father, possibly mother/grandmother relationship instead – emphasis on female leadership
	Two white children looking at “Grandpa's Clock” (Alfred's Basic Piano Library, Level 1B)	
Food:	White child eating corn on the cob in a large kitchen with curtains (Burnam, Book One)	Afterschool participants receive a meal: for example – frozen individual dinner of cooked carrots and spaghetti and meatballs, 2 donuts, a red apple, small carton of 2% milk, eaten with plastic utensils Students all eat cafeteria food at school for lunch. Favorite meals are: nachos, pizza, burgers, as well as a special Thanksgiving dinner when they are served turkey and 'greens'
	Buying ice cream cones from white man in an ice cream parlour (Burnam, Book One)	Corner Store (convenience store) – one or two on every block -adults/older youth generally loiter and visit on the street by the corner store names like: Grocery Mart, Mini Market, Sun's Food Market, USA Fried Chicken
	White boy eating an ice cream cone, philosophizing on whether or not money can buy happiness (Alfred's	Becky walked to the program with her friend – a boy who is older and has 'lots of money' and can

	Basic Piano Library, Level 1B)	'buy stuff' at the corner store Children at the afterschool program often get a reward of candy at the end of the day
History/Pride:	Song about shoe cobbler – a white old man (showing pride in history) (Burnam, Book One)	African spiritual, or Puerto Rican traditional song to show pride in history (Latino girl in white dress for catholic ceremony)
	A white youth dressed up, playing a grand piano in a formal concert (Alfred's Basic Piano Library, Level 1B)	An African American youth doing the same thing (Lacey's 17 year-old older 'sister' – who is actually her aunt, but lives with her – sang a song in the homecoming talent show at the high school – the grandmother cried 'tears of joy' at her daughter's success in the performance. Afterwards the school community had a picnic party in the parking lot of the school, with music and food)
Transportation:	White children on school bus (Glover, Primer Level)	African American/Latino children walking to school in an urban environment (long walks – up to one hour, important to be home before dark for safety)
	A white cowboy riding a brown horse in the desert, singing with a guitar (Alfred's Basic Piano Library, Level 1B)	Ruth (a Latino girl) remembers riding a horse at a flea market when she was little – she remembers it was a white horse (little girl fantasy of riding a pony). She has never been to a real farm.
Activities:	White boys watching Cowboys and Indians on TV (Glover, Primer Level)	African American/Latino children watching TV – Colleen's favorite childhood song was “Elmo” - one of her favorite pastimes was watching TV
	White boy flying a kite in the countryside (Glover, Primer Level)	Latino boy (Joe) making paper airplanes and flying them in the basement of the church at the afterschool program
		Adele told me that when it rains at recess, the young boys play with cars, and the young girls paint their nails. (However, one girl splashed nail polish remover in a boys eyes – on purpose, for the second time in a row – and the teacher was upset)

Relating to Piano Theory:	Four children running/climbing over a life-size piano keyboard – one token African American child with 3 white children (Alfred's Basic Piano Library, Level 1B)	Same thing – with one token white child with African American children (inverting the minority status)
	Generic white hands to show finger numbering	Generic brown hands to show finger numbering

Cultural Themes:

I then had cultural symbols in my data, important to the culture studied, but not necessarily an 'alternative' to a symbol found in a previous piano book. These I also incorporated into the book.

Names:

Names are important. My first lesson with Becky, a Latino girl, I asked to learn her whole name. I asked how she spells her first and last name, and this prompted a detailed description of her naming process, which morphed into the naming process of her baby sister. Her mother obviously found immense empowerment in the naming of her children, evidenced by their original first names, but middle names linked to their Puerto Rican heritage. The mother actually gave Becky the privilege of naming her baby sister. Lest this be confused as lazy parenting, the girl emphasized the importance her mother places on names. The mother was showing a solidarity with her daughter, by letting her take part in the naming process – including Becky as a valued member of the family. (Mind you, Becky ended up naming her sister her own middle name – a name that she does not particularly like – partly out of spite.) Becky also mentioned that her father – who is in jail, and not a regular part of the family – had no say in the naming. The family emphasized their freedom from the father by not including him.

Two African American sisters that attend the program told me that their first names matched – one was the other, backwards. Both names were beautiful. This shows the ingenuity of their mother, the freedom mothers feel in the naming of their children, and the amount of thought that goes into names.

Both of these instances show empowerment taking place. Women realize the power they have over deciding names. Since this aspect of the culture is already liberating, it was essential to include in the book.

Verbal Narratives:

Narrative – telling stories – is important. Becky was a gifted storyteller. The first 15 minutes of our lesson I usually spent listening to her dramatized stories of school (usually about fights at school). She often gestured with her hands, and even jumped up and moved about the room to illustrate her point.

She often replayed conversation by acting it out. She employed the words “she was like... I was like.” I set these words to song, depicting the storytelling process.

The Absence of Fathers:

To my knowledge, only two sibling sets that attend the afterschool program live with their dad. Most of the children I talked to did not. Many had never met their dads. Becky remembered her 8th birthday as a special event, because her dad was present (the only time she remembers meeting him). Another girl was wistful about knowing about her father, for she had never met her real father. Many siblings within families came from different fathers. Joe told me that he lives with his mom, brother, and sister, and his brother's dad was taller than his dad. Many children have experience with step fathers – but most step fathers seemed to be quite transitory. Most mention of step fathers (or mother's boyfriend) ended with a comment that he didn't live with them either any more. Children described their step fathers as 'fake' (Colleen) or not a good man (Becky). Becky said she does not love her (real) father because she does not know him.

Dads in general are not present in the culture of Allison Hill. As a result, I did not portray a traditional family in the book. I left a normal interaction with Dads out of the book, and instead focused on mothers, grandmothers, siblings and cousins. This was in an attempt not to be culturally relevant. The symbol of a father could lead to implied inferiority in a child's mind. However, a healthy self-image usually requires a male role model, or at least a healthy recognition of the lack of one. I purposely did not exclude fathers from the book, because they are important in any child's life. I made a song that explores the confusion in the culture about good fathers. I also encouraged boys to grow up to be good fathers who care for their children, by showing a visual of a boy caring for his baby.

I used the combination of symbolic interactionism and Freire's liberation theory to create a piano book that encourages African American and Latino children in poverty to gain power, even as members of a subjugated group. By understanding the culture through participant observation, I was able to create music pages that are culturally and racially affirming, and incorporate self-awareness questions and ideas into the songs. I work against the 'dominant' framework of piano pedagogy, evident in traditional piano books. I create an alternative form of learning, which is geared towards a certain sample

Conclusion:

The concept of making a culturally relevant piano book for urban children from low-income families is important given the history of the lack of educational success in this demographic. Since the main reason for the educational struggle is a lack of culturally relevant resources, it makes sense to make more resources that are relevant to the culture. Researching the culture through participant observation beforehand, through a symbolic interactionism lens, is a useful model that could be applied repetitively to make any number of educational resources that cater to the culture. The recognition of racial differences, when making culturally relevant resources, is also crucial, especially when the resource includes visuals. Since non-white racial groups have been oppressed in the U.S., it is important not to ignore this, and make educational resources that affirm the normalcy of non-white races.

The study could have benefited from a holistic method of participant observation, since I only observed the children in an afterschool environment. I would have been able to collect more comprehensive data if I had been able to observe the children at home, at school, and in their neighborhood. However, due to limited time and lack of rapport with the outside neighborhood, this was not possible. A longer observation period would also have been helpful. The data shown in the analysis section could all be applied to make more beginner piano songs – the possibilities of more songs are endless. However, due to limited time, I only made a sample selection of songs to show the concept of the theory.

The ethnographic data collected and applied in this study was just a small sample of what could be applied. The concept of culturally relevant literature is much broader than this study's application towards a beginner piano book. I chose urban culture and the creation of a piano resource to apply the theory of Freire's freedom from oppression through education. This theory could be applied more generally to any oppressed group – either minorities in the U.S. or educationally underprovided groups around the world. The theory that symbols hold meaning for cultures, and the fact that culturally relevant resources help children of a culture learn better, could also be applied to many cultures in the U.S. and around the world. Also, although the neighborhood studied fits the demographic of an urban low-income neighborhood of predominantly Latino or African American individuals, other similar urban communities in the U.S. would have a slightly different culture. Research would have to be done individually in different neighborhoods to create learning resources that cater towards specific cultural communities. This is important to avoid overgeneralizations of 'cultures,' which could ironically lead to a lack of cultural relevance. For example, the neighborhood studied (which includes a high percentage of both Latinos and African Americans, not to mention other ethnic and racial groups), differs from most urban cultures studied in the literature review that centered only around African American culture. This shows that more cultural studies with application (creating a relevant resource) are needed, but always on a grassroots level to ensure accurate cultural relevance.

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