

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: OUR MUSICAL SCHOOL: ETHNOGRAPHIC
METHODS AND CULTURALLY RELEVANT
PEDAGOGY IN ELEMENTARY GENERAL
MUSIC

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The current study has uncovered the complexities of childhood musical culture in a rural public school in Maryland with a diverse student population. Through daily interaction with her students, the researcher learned about their particular culture, including musical preferences, practices of music consumption and expression, and how students conceptualize music. The breadth and depth of knowledge the investigator was able to discover through participant observation during teaching duties demonstrates the usefulness of ethnographic methods in learning about students' musical culture for classroom music teachers. The use of this information proved to be productive in developing culturally relevant lessons that students responded to positively. In conclusion, the researcher found that pursuing an ethnographic project in order to create a culturally relevant pedagogy for her students was a worthwhile undertaking as an elementary general music educator.

OUR MUSICAL SCHOOL: ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS AND CULTURALLY
RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IN ELEMENTARY GENERAL MUSIC

By

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Preface

Teaching is viewed by many to be an important calling, and for those who teach it is the most important calling. Currently, teachers are the center of politics concerning the performance of students and accountability, and unfortunately many “bad” teachers have made headlines. However, there are still many more teachers who sacrifice and go above and beyond the requirements of their contracts in order to see their students succeed. These teachers, by necessity, wear many hats. They are students, parents, friends, counselors, coaches, cheerleaders, and sometimes even researchers.

This study, while a means to completing my master’s degree, was also my attempt to be the best teacher I could for my students. To do this, I felt that I needed to research their musical culture in order to better relate to them and be able to better relate information to them. It was extra work to design lessons around getting to know them and then designing lessons to use what I knew about their culture to engage or scaffold their learning. By the end of the study, I knew that the extra work was worth it. I can say with confidence that I know my students and I know how to make them successful in their music learning.

Teaching, while one of the most important callings, can also be one of the most difficult. There are difficult students, difficult parents, difficult choices, and difficult days. There are highs and lows, successes and failures. I felt both of these doubly as a teacher-researcher. Many of my difficulties are not mentioned in this thesis because they simply were not relevant to the scope of the study. I am by no means some “super teacher,” nor am I looking to sweep my shortcomings under the

rug while extolling my successes. There were days that the classroom verged on chaos, and I verged on panic. There were breakdowns, both in learning and in emotion, on a weekly basis. All teachers have experienced this. I do not need to tell them that not every day could be counted a success.

What I hope this thesis shows teachers is that when we expand the tools that are at our disposal, namely ethnographic methods of data collecting and practicing culturally relevant pedagogy, we can multiply our successes, and thereby ensure our students' successes. If we know our students more fully, we can serve them in exciting new ways, making the educational experience fuller for them and for ourselves.

Dedication

I am dedicating this work first and foremost to my husband, Ted, and son, Blaise, who were patient with my inattention to them while writing; I know they are both thankful that I have finally completed this work. Thanks go to my parents, Louis and Christine, whose hard work and encouragement through my years growing up gave me the opportunities that led to me realizing this goal. This is also for my students, who will hopefully reap the benefits of my work for years to come. Finally, I am dedicating this work to Nana and Bepop, who while they did not have the chance to see me complete my degree, never doubted me; I will always feel their pride and love for me, even though they are no longer with us.

Acknowledgements

While so many friends and family were encouraging during the tenure of this project, I must acknowledge a few people for their tremendous help. Many thanks go to Dr. Witzleben who was always excited about my work and made himself available for meetings, despite both of our hectic schedules. Thank you to my committee members and their valuable comments and suggestions. I am also indebted to my principal, students, and fellow teachers for their cooperation and openness during the time I was collecting data at school. I am also grateful for all of the parents who allowed their children to be a part of my study, understanding that this research had the opportunity to benefit both the children and their teachers.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The current study is an action research project that combines ethnographic research methods and reflective teaching practices in order to create a culturally relevant pedagogy for general music students in an elementary school. Because reflection is at the basis of both the ethnographic and pedagogical elements of the study, I, the author, will refer to myself as the researcher, who is both ethnographer and teacher in this context. The subjects of the study are the students whom I taught in my music classes, and I will refer to them throughout as my students.

The students in my study were those in a small, rural elementary school in southern Prince George's County, Maryland, which is a predominantly African-American county just east of Washington, DC. The small, close-knit community of my school made the school a pleasure to teach in, as the students and teachers were kind, approachable, and were very familiar with everyone in the community. Because of the particularity of this school environment, many behavioral issues were not present, as the students and their families had grown up together in this small community. Upon my reflection in this project, I realized just how special this community was, and further proved that this small, rural community with its big city urban influences had much more insight to offer an ethnographer.

As a researcher, I am coming from firm backgrounds in music education and in ethnomusicology. I have a bachelor's degree in music education and I am a certified and practicing teacher. I am also a student who has completed her master's coursework in ethnomusicology. As such, this project straddles the two fields of

music education and ethnomusicology and is entrenched with terminology from both fields. I will illuminate a few key terms that the reader will find necessary to understand this work. Firstly, this project is ethnographic in nature, meaning that I worked toward an understanding of cultural values and meaning in the lives of my students and put that insight into writing. Secondly, my work was part of an action research project, which is a procedure utilized by teachers to create effective teaching practices through self-reflection and modification. Lastly, the goal was to create a culturally relevant pedagogy for my students, which is a form of instruction that caters to the specific cultural values of my students in order to allow the students to be more successful in learning. These terms are essential to this work, which is why they are described above. Any other field-specific terminology will be described *in situ*, or more detailed descriptions can be found in the many resources cited in chapter two.

Throughout the school year when my research took place, I faced challenges as a researcher and as a teacher. Sometimes the goals of my study were put aside in order to deal with the pressures of a first year teacher. It was often a challenge to balance my roles as ethnographer and teacher. I describe many of the challenges I faced in chapter three. However, the following research questions were at the center of my focus:

1. Are ethnographic methods of data collection useful for teachers of general music in order to be knowledgeable about the students they are teaching?
2. What types of ethnographic knowledge can teachers discover about their students' musical culture?
3. How can teachers incorporate this ethnographic knowledge of their students into appropriate teaching materials and techniques?

4. How do students respond to these materials and techniques, versus materials and techniques that are appropriate solely on the basis of age and musical development?

There are many studies that have come before mine that have influenced the methods that I used in my study. I will discuss many of these studies in chapter two, as well as how the literature in music education and ethnomusicology has shown the absence, and even the need, for a study like this one in which the teacher and researcher are the same person and where educational and ethnographic methods work toward the same goal of a culturally relevant pedagogy. In chapter three, I will discuss how I used these methods in the formation of the study.

Through my daily encounters with my students I observed and participated in their musical experiences. These experiences helped me to understand how they related to music and what types of music made up the musical sphere of their lives. I describe many of my experiences with them in chapter four, and examine these experiences in order to determine what they uncover about my students' musical culture. While chapter four contains many descriptions of various encounters with my students, these descriptions are not meant to comprise an ethnography because that was not the main goal of this research project. While the ethnographic data gathered could possibly be formed into an ethnography, my research questions were more focused on how the ethnographic data on students could be gathered and implemented in the classroom. I approached studying their musical culture with the premise that it would be much more valuable to learn from them about how they thought about music, rather than come to lesson planning with assumptions based simply on

demographic knowledge. As my study progressed, I quickly realized how complex their culture is, and recognized that I, nor any adult, could come to fully understand their culture without laying our assumptions aside. My realizations about their culture and the impact of the study on my students and me will be discussed in chapter five.

As a teacher, the central mission of this study was to discover how to better serve my students by creating lessons that they would not only enjoy, but were designed for them to succeed in gaining musical skill and knowledge. To do so, I would need to reflect on what I learned about their musical culture, and also reflect on how successful my lessons were in the classroom. My ideas, lessons, and strategies went through many revisions before they approached any level of success. Although this process was critical in the teaching practice, I do not describe it with much depth, as it is a natural and necessary part of the development of lessons for any teacher. Instead, I will describe how I used the information I gathered in culturally relevant lessons and discuss how my students responded to those lessons.

It was my intention by taking on this project to determine how reasonable it would be for any general music teacher to undertake a similar process of ethnographic discovery and pedagogical implementation. Chapters four and five will show that while the effort to learn about and tailor lessons to students' musical culture is great, the rewards are worthwhile.

Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

The present study creates an intersection of three distinct areas of research: ethnomusicological studies of children's music, educational ethnography, and the development of culturally relevant pedagogy. These three areas of research have been developed individually, not that there has not been some previous overlap, but for very different goals. Studies on children's music by ethnomusicologists have been undertaken for the purpose of documenting and finding insights into a certain culture's children's music—i.e., the Venda (Blacking 1967), urban black girls (Gaunt 2006), or international school children (Marsh 2008). Educational ethnography, also known as classroom or school ethnography, however, usually has comparative goals for the research, such as comparing effectiveness of teaching methods (Masemann 1978) or comparing methods to decrease intergroup tensions (Jacob 1995). Studies in culturally relevant pedagogies also often take on comparative analysis of multiple styles of teaching (Carlos 2005) or present case studies of effective culturally relative teaching strategies (Raval 2004). What all of these studies miss is the element of an action research paradigm, where the researcher is just as much a subject of the research as the students or children. The teacher examines her own teaching methods for effectiveness in a process that is more about personal and professional growth than comparative study (Dicker 1990). In this study, I attempted to blend the four

styles of inquiry found in ethnomusicological studies of children's music, educational ethnography, the development of culturally relevant pedagogy, and action research together in order to answer the questions I had about creating a pedagogy in response to my students' culture and how what I learned could be applied to other general music classrooms.

Ethnomusicological Studies of Children

Perhaps the earliest and certainly one of the most well-known examples of an ethnomusicological study of children's music is John Blacking's study of Venda children's music. In his ethnography, he describes the learning process as well as meaning of the music for the Venda. He discovers that in Venda society, children do not necessarily learn easier songs before more difficult songs. For them, the social context of the piece is more important than the difficulty the piece presents for the learner. Learning the song is a necessity, in order to belong and identify with their age group (Blacking 1967:31). Culturally, their developmentally appropriate repertoire has more to do with the coincidence of certain age milestones and the songs that go with them, rather than Western notions of how children structure musical knowledge. Gaining this kind of knowledge about children's music is insightful not just for ethnomusicologists, but for music educators as well, as it challenges what American universities teach about how children are supposed to learn music.

Margaret Kartomi draws on Blacking's work in order to describe children's music-making in South Australia. She remarks that children have their own genre of music that is not just a simpler version of adult repertoire; it has its own values

(Kartomi 1980:209). They have their own creative processes that show that their cognition of their music has not been molded to the type of cognition their parents use. This is not to say that they are “just little people learning to become adults”; they have developed their own musical preferences. If children’s musical preferences and cognitions in South Australia did not mirror their parents’, then certainly music educators cannot expect the demographics of their classroom to tell them about their students’ preferences or how their students think about music.

In her ethnography on the music of the Gurung of Nepal, Pirkko Moisala tells how boys and girls all learn how to play the *mādal* drum through imitation of adults. During the *rodī*, the drum is passed from person to person, and the children are able to imitate the rhythmic patterns they have heard. Moisala is able to uncover certain elements of musical cognition in Gurung society, such as how melody and rhythm are not thought of as separate, but as a single entity of a song (1991:165). Moisala focuses on how musical concepts and skills are passed from adults to children, rather than examining Gurung children’s music as its own entity, which suggests that perhaps Gurung children do not have a separate sphere of children’s music, or that Moisala does not regard it as separate. Nevertheless, she examines the important relationship of how music is passed down from one generation to another.

Similarly, Kofi Agawu (1995), in his study of the Ewe, pointed to how children’s music-making mirrors adults’. However, he goes on to say that children and adult musical languages are “locked in a dialectic” (ibid.:63) and that while separate from one another are not to be treated as distinct cultures, instead they are on

a continuum. Agawu also remarks that children's forms of music-making are no less complex than adults and that they do not lack cultural meaning.

Kyra Gaunt (2006) draws on Agawu's concept of the spheres of adult and child music-making being placed on a continuum. She explores the musical play of black girls in America in order to locate black popular music influences in their songs, as well as the influence their songs have on black popular music. Gaunt examines black girls' music as its own entity, even though that music is not in cultural isolation. The music and games exist as an expression of childhood, but more importantly for Gaunt, are inextricably connected to black culture. The music is a product not just of youth, but of ethnicity. In the current study, I try to move beyond demographic markers of culture in order to be able to discover a unique culture based on the intercultural nature of a school in a location with a diverse population.

In *The Musical Playground* (2008), Kathryn Marsh researched children's musical play in several countries around the world. She approaches her research as both an ethnomusicologist and as a music educator. Like Gaunt, she acknowledges the influence of mass media on children's culture, but also notes how it is only one of very many influences on their music. Marsh documents the extent of creativity found in the ways children compose and improvise in musical games, and gives the students the chance to provide a reflective discourse on their performances. By having students talk about the music as well as get more comfortable with the researcher, Marsh was able to break down the walls of apprehension and able to gain greater insight into their cognition about the music they were sharing. I approached this study in many ways as a cultural outsider, attempting to gain the trust of my students

through time, and creating an environment where my students felt they could be open and honest. I in turn was able to learn more about my students. My hope was that, like Marsh, I could allow students to not only share performances and preferences, but also share how they think about music.

Sonja Lynn Downing (2010) discusses the way Balinese girls in gamelans navigate gender- and age-appropriate behaviors with regard to their music-making. Downing illustrates how these girls are not just passive in cultural consumption, but are actively changing the cultural conceptions of female gamelan players. Like Blacking and Marsh, Downing shows that the girls have room for creativity, that they are not just imitators of adult culture, as Pierre Bourdieu (1977) suggests. The children in my study also exhibit such agency in their cultural conceptions and behavior.

Educational Ethnography

Ethnographic methods of inquiry started to be taken seriously in educational research in the 1970s, although, according to Louis Smith (1978), many researchers did not respect the validity of these qualitative methods for the field of education, specifically because quantitative and comparative methods were the norm. Smith argues that the social and pedagogical nature of educational research will eventually convince the remaining critics that participant observation can be useful, despite the propensity for subjectivity. However, by the 1980s, ethnographic methods were becoming more important in educational research in order to provide data at a “micro,” rather than “macro” level, and interpretive study of small research populations became useful for analyzing day-to-day behaviors. Vandra Lea

Masemann references a presentation by Douglas Foley, saying that ethnographic research is the only means to fully study techniques that teachers use (1982:14).¹ By seeing teacher practices as they happen, the researcher can discover relationships between practices and results, and monitor social and educational outcomes.

In 1987, Patti Krueger made the case that ethnography had been embraced by researchers in music education because of its ability to foster closeness between investigators and subjects that led to unexpected observations and led to deeper insights, not just the what, but the why, of the situation (1987:1). Scholars had already utilized ethnography toward gaining unexpected insights in music education research, specifically in J. R. Zimmerman's dissertation on students' musical experiences (1982) and Patricia Shehan Campbell's study of transmission methods in Asian music (Shehan 1985). These studies showed that students' ways of learning varied between cultures and those ways were in turn acculturated. Campbell's subsequent research showed few cross-cultural modes of learning, and those commonalities, such as the role of an expert, developing eye-hand coordination, and aural-oral imitation, were broadly cross-cultural; however, there were still many different cultural variations of those modes (Campbell 2001). Whether or not the modes of learning being studied are cross-cultural or culture-specific, the ultimate goal is learning more about the transmission of music so that more effective teaching methods can be developed and implemented. In the current study, I am seeking to determine the most effective

¹ Douglas Foley, "Labour and Legitimation in Schools: Notes on Doing Ethnography " (revised version of paper presented at the Comparative and International Education Society meeting, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1979), mimeographed (University of Texas at Austin, Department of Anthropology, 1980, p. 38). Original text could not be found by author.

teaching methods in my own classroom, based on how my students show they learn best.

Cherie Stellacio's 1995 dissertation provided a case study of music teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and goals within their practice of their multicultural curricula. She used interviews with the teachers, as well as observations of their teaching process, in order to understand their approach to a multicultural curriculum and the teachers' strategies for adopting the curricula for their students. Stellacio refers to her case study as an ethnography; however, it does not focus on a specific cultural unit, but rather on how teachers deal with the cultural interactions between their students and the curriculum. She also does not delve into the cultural backgrounds of the students, as her interest lies in teachers' adaptations to curricular demands. While the current study looks at how one teacher uses a multicultural curriculum, the students' role in the study is much more prominent, as they, in a way, are practically directing the curriculum and influencing the pedagogical approaches of the teacher.

In her dissertation project, Chee-Hoo Lum (2007) studied a class of twenty-eight Singapore school children. Informed by Appadurai's theory of techno-, media-, and ethno-scapes (Appadurai 1986), she discovers insights about the students and their distinct musical culture. Lum makes a point of discussing the students' musical culture at school and as citizens of their country separately from their musical culture at home and in relation to the mass media. Lum gives a glimpse into how complex the musical culture that children navigate truly is. This complexity, as well as specifically the influences of media and technology in children's musical culture, is at the center of my current study. However, while Lum only posits suggestions for how this

knowledge can be put into practice in music education at large, this study utilized the ethnographic information and created a relevant pedagogy not just for future applications or other students, but for the students in the current study.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Prior research has shown that students benefit greatly in their music learning experience when teachers use developmentally appropriate pedagogy in the classroom (Miranda 2000). Developmentally appropriate pedagogy constructs lessons around students' physical and cognitive strengths and weaknesses. For example, it is not appropriate to construct a kindergarten lesson that requires them to sit for thirty minutes while being attentive. Culturally appropriate or relevant pedagogy utilizes the skills that students have developed from their specific cultural backgrounds in music. It is of note that there is little literature on the effects of culturally appropriate music pedagogy. Having searched the contents of the *Music Educators Journal*, *Journal of Research in Music Education*, *British Educational Research Journal*, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, and *Educational Researcher*, I was unable to find research in this area. I did find one dissertation on culturally relevant pedagogy in the music classroom (Carlos 2005) and a two-volume collection of articles that focused solely on teaching music to urban students (Frierson-Campbell 2006), which will be discussed in the following pages.

There is, however, ample literature on culturally responsive pedagogy in educational situations outside of the music classroom, which suggests that educational fields other than music have more readily adopted this approach. Classrooms where this has been shown to work include mathematics (Gruestein et al 1997), foreign language (Sheets 1995), and reading (Ladson-Billings 1995). In these cases, when a teacher was willing to adapt his or her pedagogy to the cultural background of the students, they were able to perform better than they had in the past.

Ladson-Billings put out a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy which described how successful teachers conceptualized their role and their students' roles in the classroom (1995:477-482). Teachers who practiced a pedagogy responsive to their students' cultural needs conceptualized themselves as part of the community, which inspired them to give back to the community through teaching and reinforce a feeling of community in the classroom. Teachers believed that their students were able to achieve. They viewed their pedagogy as an art that was being refined by what they learned from their students, so they set up dialogic relations with their students. Teachers assisted students in constructing learning, rather than teaching didactically. When assessing students they allowed for multiple modes of excellence, acknowledging that cultural factors play a part in how students process information. By combining these traits, Ladson-Billings comes up with an ideal teacher that teaches using a pedagogy personalized for her students.

Kimberly Carlos's 2005 study focused on how teachers perceived their students in terms of ethnicity, and how those beliefs may have manifested in pedagogical practice. She interviewed the teachers and observed them teaching their

classes. Carlos found that teachers reported beliefs that often differed greatly from how they treated their students in practice. While many reported the belief that all students could succeed, the same teachers based their instruction on the assumption that they had students who lacked basic skills (ibid.:158). The teachers in the study showed that without detailed knowledge of their students, such as that found through ethnographic means, they based their assumptions about their students on demographics alone. Therefore, in practice, they did not structure their lessons in a way that could be specifically culturally relevant, since their racial or economic backgrounds are not the only source of culture. This study, instead, created a pedagogy based on more precise cultural identifications of students, found out through ethnographic modes of discovery, rather than simply race or socio-economic labels. This pedagogy is more attuned to the students than in the case of the teachers in Carlos's study.

In Carol Frierson-Campbell's *Teaching Music in the Urban Classroom*, music education scholars approach teaching in urban classrooms from many perspectives. While one article in particular (Robinson 2006), which I will discuss in detail later, addresses culturally responsive pedagogy, all of the articles identify the students first and foremost as urban. In practicality, this sheds little light on the culture of the students. Donna Emmanuel asserts:

Outside perceptions of particular cultural groups, including those typically identified as "urban," often hold inaccuracies that lead to misinterpretations of behaviors and attitudes. In other words, the concept of cultural identity as we often define it is much too simplistic

to be of real value when dealing with diverse cultures in the urban classroom (ibid. 23-24).

In Emmanuel's article, Camille, a student researcher and teacher, details her struggle with navigating the culture of the classroom. Camille has to put aside her assumptions to get to know her students. Camille's experiences and revelations are specific to her interactions with her students, showing how generalizing about urban classrooms does not help eradicate the stereotypes that Emmanuel purports to exist in the quote above, nor is it useful in teachers' daily practices, because it does not tell the whole story of the students' cultures. In this study, I put aside demographic markers such as urban, rural, black, white, poor, and rich as much as possible in order to give a clearer picture of my students' actual cultural values as they pertain to music, rather than focus on only a sliver of my students' musical influences.

In Kathy M. Robinson's article on culturally responsive teaching, she includes experiences from teachers who practice this pedagogical method in their classrooms. She points out how these teachers demonstrate Geneva Gay's five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching; 1. Developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity; 2. Including ethnic and culturally diverse content in the curriculum; 3. Demonstrating caring and building a learning community; 4. Cross-cultural communication; and 5. Cultural congruity in classroom instruction (2000). The teachers created opportunities in and out of the classroom to get to know their students. Their curriculum was varied in cultural content, from samba, to Louis Armstrong, to Beethoven in order to provide balance (ibid.:43). These dedicated teachers have found ways to reach their students on a personal level, rather than

adhering to stereotypes of demographics. The intention for my study was to similarly build understanding about my students while we build a rapport; through building and implementing a culturally relevant pedagogy, my students can develop musical skills and knowledge.

Action Research

Action research is not a new development in educational studies. It has been a way that many teachers have documented the process of becoming better teachers. Unlike experiments that control variables, action research projects allow all sorts of variables to come into play; researchers must deal with these variables in practice and analysis. By being presented with challenges, the researcher has the chance to reexamine her assumptions (Comfort 1985:105). Therefore, instead of excising unknowns, the action researcher welcomes them, creating a method that is more realistic and also informs the knowledge being produced by the project. According to Carr and Kemmis, action research is a “form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practice, their understandings of these practices, and the situations in which these practices are carried out” (1986:162). Reflective inquiry is the basis for change in an action research project; the researcher evaluates which modes of action work and which do not. So far, the process might appear similar to any other research project; however, once evaluation is complete, a new plan of action is developed and put into place. The results of this plan are also evaluated, and the process continues. Action

research is not just a process of examining the result of an action, but a process of developing a solution to a problem.

Mary Dicker (1990) used an action research paradigm to navigate a new and unfamiliar teaching assignment. By reflecting in her journal, Dicker was able to track which lessons, teaching styles, and approaches were successful and which were not. When she found using the textbook did not hold her students' attention, she had to revamp the way she thought about using the textbook in class. Going forward in the class, Dicker was able to use approaches that the students responded to positively. Dicker also found that her style of lesson planning needed to change because she felt she was overwhelmed and her students were underperforming. I had a similar experience with a "day-to-day" style of lesson planning failing, so I focused on creating units and projects, about which my students were much more enthusiastic and which allowed them to develop and reiterate knowledge. Both Dicker and I found that reflection and editing of the teaching process made us better teachers.

Drawing on my findings, I will attempt to produce a pedagogical model of my own that I will implement in my elementary music classroom, after I have collected data on the ethnographic background of my students. I will evaluate the lessons that I implement for their success, then redesign and reemploy them in order to develop a pedagogical model that works in my classroom. My project will combine classroom ethnography, focusing on children's music, with an action research project where I evaluate the curriculum and my teaching strategies in order to create a culturally relevant pedagogy for my students. Through the process of data collection, lesson

planning, evaluating, and reflection, I will attempt to answer the research questions, which can be found in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Setting of Study

The study took place at an elementary school in a rural community in Prince George's County, Maryland, where I was employed as a general and vocal music teacher for the 2009-2010 school year. I will not name the school due to concerns about the privacy of my students. Observations took place over the course of the school year from August to June. I saw all students at the school two to three times a week during half-hour classes. The majority of observations took place in my music classroom, although there were also interactions in the halls, cafeteria, and playground, and during after-school and extracurricular activities, such as choir practice, field trips, and concerts.

Participants

The participants for my study were the students from one of the two schools at which I taught during the 2009-2010 school year. My decision in choosing only one of the schools was due to many factors. I felt I could not conflate the students in both

schools because of the different locations of the schools (rural versus suburban), the differing demographics of the schools (48% African American, 42% Caucasian, 10% other in the school in the study, versus 89% African American, 6% Hispanic, 5% other in the excluded school)² and differing sizes of the schools (247 students versus about 700, respectively, for the 2010 school year). I chose the rural school because of the following factors: of the two schools, it was the one where I saw all of the students in my classes, had my own classroom (versus teaching in other teacher's classroom and transporting my materials on a cart), and saw every class of students every time I was at school.

The students from the participating school were aged 4 to 13 years old, in Pre-Kindergarten through sixth grade. There were students from different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds, as described above. The school was in a close-knit community that prided itself on parent involvement. Many of the families grew up together in the community over several generations. Students were very familiar and friendly with all of their classmates, since there were small class sizes and only one or two classes per grade level. This prevented the prevalence of cliques or obvious subcultural groups in the school. While the school was located in rural, Southern Prince George's County, Maryland, its proximity to Washington, DC and influx of new housing developments in the area has brought formally urban residents to the area, and was a large influence on all the families, as many parents worked in or near Washington DC.

² Information found on <http://www.mdk12.org>.

Eight of the 247 students in the school were not able to participate in the study, as their parents did not consent to their participation. All parents were given the option of requesting that their child not be included in the written thesis, by having their students return a signed form that was given to each student to take home (Appendix A). The forms were put in students' homework folders, which were taken home and checked by parents every day. The students whose parents did not consent were not taken out of classes, but any observations of their musical activities will not be discussed.

Ethnographic versus Participatory Action Research Models

I conducted this inquiry as a participatory action research study that used ethnographic means to uncover how to make the instructional strategies used in the music classroom more culturally relevant to my students. In ethnomusicological projects, the participant-observer's goal may be to describe the musical culture or, more critically, interpret the musical culture. The participant-observer model for research worked well for this study because as a music teacher, I was obligated to participate in the lessons: I sang, made music, and discussed music with the students. Because I was a participant and part of the action and environment of the classroom, students entrusted information about their families, friends, and musical habits in me. As a teacher, I spent over nine months getting to know my students and their musical preferences and behaviors.

Instead of interviewing or surveying students formally, I gave assignments that had students answer questions about their musical interests and musical culture,

or to describe reactions to music. This was a compromise strategy: I was not able to interview individual students, but this avoided treating the whole school as a unified group. Students were able to give individual feedback, but it was not as time consuming as interviewing individual students. I also used visual cues or data to supplement what I had heard or read my students express about their own musical culture.

Although I have primarily described this study as participatory action research, it is also just as much a musical ethnography. While interviews were not conducted, assignments, class discussion, and students' volunteered information provided data much richer than what I could have gleaned from a survey or interview, as demonstrated in the following chapter. Critical description of my students' musical culture necessitated that I find a way to make mental and physical fieldnotes, where the field was my classroom. Having little time in the classroom to take notes, I found myself jotting notes on calendar pages, on scrap pieces of paper, or in files otherwise used for grading purposes, using my hour-long commute to mentally rehash what happened in class that day, and then promptly forgetting to write it all down when I got home. The reliance on notes taken (mentally or otherwise) in or out of the field shows the necessity for ethnographic methods in this project. The self-reflective nature of fieldnotes strengthens the self-reflective nature of the participatory action research model that I also relied upon in my study.

I strove not only to describe the musical culture of my students, but to use that knowledge to answer research questions that would provide insight for me as an educator, and possibly for other educators in order to offer new ideas for music

pedagogy. In order to do so, my research is based on a model for participatory action research that was informed by Paulo Freire's "critical pedagogy" (1970), which makes it applicable to the educational context of my study. There are four main components of the action research cycle: planning, acting, monitoring, and reflecting (Kemmis and McTaggart 1982:7). In terms of how those steps unfolded in the music classroom, my process involved lesson planning, teaching, observing, self-reflection or fieldnotes, and using insights to improve the efficacy of future lessons. This process was sometimes used formally in revisions of lesson plans to use in the future, and sometimes used informally, in the minutes during or between lessons.

Recording Observations

The main method for recording observations was taking mental and physical fieldnotes, as described above. Fieldnotes were taken when cultural information about students was presented in class or in their assignments. Assignments are journals which could not be kept by the teacher because of district policies regarding the return or storage of assignments. Student journals are kept in a file cabinet on school premises, not in the possession of the teacher. Because of this, much valuable information is not always at the disposal of the researcher, and many particulars of individual students' musical cultures may not have been noted during the grading process.

There were few opportunities for video or audio recordings, because the school system required each child to have a press-release consent form signed (Appendix B). In every class, there was at least one student who did not have

permission to be on camera, making recording of everyday lessons impossible. In certain circumstances, such as concerts, all students who performed were made to return signed consent forms from their parents so that videotaping could take place during the performance (Appendix C). On one occasion, students were recorded by a local television station in order to promote a school fundraising event. Any students making music on camera had signed release forms.

The Role of the Researcher

As this was an ethnographic project with an educational and reflective focus, I conducted this research as a participant and researcher. In the music classroom I acted as ethnographer, educator, student, and contributor to the musical culture. My role in the classroom was even more complex than that of participant-observer, since as an educator I directly controlled the environment, the music, and the discourse that was taking place, and I acted as an authority figure, not just a member of the community. As such, the conclusions I drew from my observations in the classroom had to be tempered, since I acknowledged my own biases not only in my interpretation of data, but also in how I conducted my classroom and its impact on the observable musical culture of my students.

In an attempt to be an effective and supportive educator as well as an equitable and receptive ethnographer, I strove to create a classroom environment open to musical and cultural discourse. As an educator, I did all I could to foster a classroom culture that accepted cultural differences and encouraged discussion of

both students' own cultures and foreign cultures. I also endeavored to make my classroom a safe place for musical expression. Philosophically, I believe that this is an obligation for an educator, despite the pressures of time, classroom management, or the curriculum. As an educator and ethnographer, it was not my place to judge my students or to stifle their expression of musical culture, despite the fact that it was my job to mold them into competent musicians in a curriculum that is situated in the United States and tends to emphasize Western or American musical expression and culture.

Lesson Planning

Primarily in the first half of the school year, I designed lessons that introduced students to concepts such as musical traditions, and had them answer questions in class or in assignments that let them open up about their own musical culture. Students who were sociable often described their family traditions in great detail in class discussions, whereas students who were shy opened up more in written assignments. Some strategies to get students thinking about their own musical culture were lessons which required them to compare a musical culture to their own, explore their own musical tastes, and share music that represented themselves or their family.

As mentioned, much of the information students shared about their musical culture was in connection to prompts that were specifically worked into the lesson plan. To add a systematic element to the study, some lessons were formatted so that all students in a particular class answered the same questions in writing. Some questions were very pointed, while others were much more open. Questions were

asked about students' musical preferences, their musical traditions, and how they responded to music and cultures they heard in class.

Once I had garnered information about my students' cultures, I worked that insight into new, more culturally relevant lessons. For example, the lesson might integrate popular dance moves into learning a new song, connect the popular music that they know to its roots in other styles such as jazz, or incorporate videos from movies or television shows that they know in order to introduce a song or to help them relate to a historic figure by comparing him to a popular one. I then gauged how the students responded to these instructional strategies and changed subsequent iterations of the same lesson or future lessons to use more effective strategies or change strategies.

Research Questions

The ethnographic methods and participatory action research process were used in order to answer the following research questions:

1. Are ethnographic methods of data collection useful for teachers of general music in order to be knowledgeable about the students they are teaching?
2. What types of ethnographic knowledge can teachers discover about their students' musical culture?
3. How can teachers incorporate this ethnographic knowledge of their students into appropriate teaching materials and techniques?
4. How do students respond to these materials and techniques, versus materials and techniques that are appropriate solely on the basis of age and musical development?

The next chapter will discuss the ways I attempted to address these questions.

Chapter 4: Research Results

Answering Research Question 1

In order to answer the question “are ethnographic methods of data collection useful for teachers of general music in order to be knowledgeable about the students they are teaching?” one must explain “ethnographic methods.” Three common means of collecting ethnographic data are participating and observing, conducting interviews, and gathering visual data (O’Reilly 2005). Participant-observation is an ethnographic method that is often the primary form of data collection in ethnomusicological studies, because learning to play an instrument, being a part of a concert, or experiencing a carnival is not only the easiest way to experience the culture, but also puts the researcher on equal footing with other participants, opening up discourse about music and culture. Interviews, whether formal or impromptu, provide in-depth cultural knowledge from culture-bearers by directly answering researchers’ questions. Gathering visual data lets researchers quickly assess symbolic representations of culture, such as the way members of a group dress or open up discourse, or the meaning of certain decorations on instruments. Combining all three methods yields a fuller, more robust perception of the culture being studied. These methods are used to generate fieldnotes, the recorded research for ethnographic writings, or ethnography. The goal of this study was not to create an ethnography, or narrative about my students, but to describe my students’ culture for the purpose of using the insights gained to create better lessons for my students.

In my study, I found all three methods to be useful; however, their usefulness varied depending upon the situation. During certain classroom activities, I was able to better use one method than another, or fit the method to my needs. As a researcher doing a study at my place of work, my job duties had to come before my study, which required making sacrifices in the quantity, quality, and reflexivity of the information I was able to record. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss how I adapted the three ethnographic methods described for use in my elementary music classroom.

Participant-Observation

As the teacher in the classroom, I necessarily participated in music-making and discourse about music. However, in order to be able to observe how my students interacted with music, I had to create classroom situations that prompted their musical expression. In this way, I was a facilitator, as well as a participant and observer. In most of my lessons, I was consumed with the action of the lesson, whether it be singing, dancing, or writing. I rarely got the chance to observe my students creating without boundaries, thereby giving me the chance to act as an observer. For example, after watching the show *STOMP*, students participated in a lesson to create group rhythmic compositions using found objects. The rhythms that they used in their compositions were the bass lines prevalent in hip hop and pop music, or from the melody lines of popular songs. Students incorporated small lyrical phrases from popular hip hop songs, or added their own original raps. When using body percussion, students used moves from stepping, an African-American dance form made popular in movies like *Stomp the Yard*, which many of the students reported being familiar

with, and had mentioned in connection with the movie *STOMP*. By having students create music, I was able to see how they meld the different styles of music that they consume into an integrated expression.

However, I did not necessarily need to actively create lessons in order to observe students making music. During my ten months at the school, I heard students singing in the hall, at recess, in classes, at lunch, and at times before, during, and after school. These unprompted musical expressions let me see the dichotomy between the music that was part of the curriculum and the music that students were involved in outside of school.

Interviewing

During the time of my study, I concluded that interviewing students individually or formally would have taken up far too much instructional time. Even having each student fill out a survey would probably have yielded little cultural information, as students were mostly unaware of what constituted “culture” or “tradition.” Unlike adults, students needed more to express their thoughts than a survey allowed. Most importantly, I wanted to get to know they *how* they thought, more than *what* they thought. Instead of conducting interviews, I combined class lessons and assignments with questions that helped students process the information presented in the lesson and relate what they learned about culture to their own lives, thereby eliciting interview-like responses in written and verbal forms. For example, I had students fill out a music interest inventory forms as part of a lesson on music

styles and using music terminology. Students were able to spend time focusing on a few questions, and were able to identify at least a song or style that they enjoyed.

Students who had problems identifying or describing their favorite music were able to ask for help, and I counseled them on ways to figure out what their favorite music was. I tried to find a balance between suggesting ways to think about music and bringing to the forefront the way that the students themselves think about music. As a teacher, I was in charge of structuring their musical learning, helping them grow in their musical skills and thinking as per a subscribed curriculum, but as an ethnographer, I wanted to know how they thought about music independent of what they learned in class. As much as I wanted students to succeed and complete the assignment, it would not benefit me to have the wrong idea about the way students think about music and to use that incorrect information in my future teaching strategies. As an educator in a school setting, being open to how the students wanted to express their musical interests gave me much more insight into their musical culture than conducting selected interviews, which I had little or no time for in the first place.

Gathering Visual Data

Even though all students wore uniforms to school, they expressed their musical interests on binders, notebooks, or backpacks. Even though many of these expressions were made possible through the commercial availability of merchandise that endorsed music stars, parents and students were subscribing to and identifying with these trends in youth music culture. I saw Hannah Montana on backpacks and

even birthday cupcakes, cutouts of Taylor Swift or Justin Beiber placed in binders, and *High School Musical* books and notebooks. By keeping my eyes open for expressions of musical culture outside of those that I had structured for the classroom, I was able to gather data on my students' musical culture that I might have otherwise missed, especially since I had not even considered the impact of the merchandising of musical franchises to young children.

Summary

At base, the ethnographic methods of participant observation, interviewing, and gathering visual data are useful for an educator to gain insight on the musical cultures of her students. However, an educator must merge and modify these methods to her advantage. While her students are indeed the culture bearers from whom she will be learning, because of the power relationship between teacher and student, she cannot rely on the student-teacher model in studying a foreign music. Deborah Wong learning taiko drumming (2005) or Timothy Rice learning to play *gaida* (1994) were both able to do this, because, for the most part, they are the student and not the teacher. Students, especially those in elementary school, have difficulty articulating what they know about their own culture and how they think about music, so they are not necessarily the best informants in the standard sense. That is not to say that students cannot be good informants, as they are, of course, the best informants when it comes to studying children's music. No adult, not even their parents, could guess how children think about music, especially when it comes to explaining trends that are particular to their age, school, or class.

Answering Research Question 2

Through my observations and questions, I came to discover what kinds of ethnographic knowledge teachers could glean from their students over the course of a school year. I was able to discern the ways that students express music and which music they chose to express, how they thought about music, and how they consume music in their everyday lives. This kind of knowledge gave me insight into not only which musics were part of their everyday lives, but also how they interacted with that music on a daily basis. Knowing this, I could relate to these modes of interaction in discussions about music, and incorporate new music into their world view by using the methods of music consumption that they were used to.

How Students Express Music

Students found time and opportunity to express the music they knew in and out of class. During breaks in between classes or activities and during lessons designed to allow them to express themselves, students performed songs and dances that were part of their everyday lives. In my year at school, I was able to observe children from ages four through twelve showing me the music that they know and love. The songs and dances came from many different styles, such as pop, hip hop, or country, and different decades, from the 1960s to the present. With as much diversity as there was in their expressions, there were some trends that still stood out: 1) the type of music students most preferred to express, 2) how the music that they knew informed all expressions of music, and 3) how students treated the act of dancing.

As expected, most students were familiar with and preferred pop and hip hop music, and most of their musical expressions were in this style. Students sang songs by famous male and female popular artists, including Michael Jackson, Justin Beiber, Jason DeRullo, Jay Sean, Jay-Z, Alicia Keys, Rihanna, Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and Miley Cyrus. The race of the students had little to do with the race of the artists they listened to, except that I did not observe any African-American or Hispanic students listen to country, while some, but not all, of their Caucasian counterparts did. This could perhaps be due to the lack of racial crossover in country music, unlike in popular and hip hop genres, where more students have artists with whom they could identify.

Girls tended to sing songs that were originally sung by women and boys tended to sing or rap songs by men. Boys tended to favor rapping over singing when it came to spontaneous creation of music, whereas girls expressed themselves through singing, which may have to do with the fact that in many hip hop songs, the rappers are almost always male and the backup singers are often the only female voices in songs. In one lesson, students were in the computer lab, using a website that let them explore music learning and creation independently. Students were excited to share their compositions with me and with each other. One boy, because of impaired vision, was working collaboratively with another student. The two boys used a graphical composition tool to create a rhythmic accompaniment, and then took turns rapping over the music.

Both boys and girls in my school were equally musically outgoing, however. In my past experiences and in much of the literature³, boys are reluctant to sing because of peer pressure and cultural images of masculinity and femininity. This did not seem to be a problem for many of my students. Perhaps boys viewed rapping as a masculine alternative to singing or they saw there were many singers in pop and hip hop that would be viewed as masculine, so that by singing songs by men would secure their masculinity. There were, however, exceptions to the gender segregation. Even boys, specifically an outgoing twelve year old boy in sixth grade, could be caught singing Miley Cyrus's immensely popular "Party in the USA" at the school dance, or when they thought no one was paying attention, even though the teen idol's songs were said to be too girly at other times. When it came to songs by Justin Bieber, girls enjoyed singing the songs, such as "Baby," but boys refused and would cover their ears and complain when girls would sing the songs or try to defend the singer. Even as elementary school students, the boys in my school were very cognizant of the image of Justin Bieber, and viewed him as effeminate, making him a singer they did not want to emulate. Students recounted a very pejorative discourse they had heard on television, radio, or the Internet that had questioned not just Justin Bieber's masculinity, but also his sexual orientation. Although such discourse and negative views on sexual orientation are not generally seen as appropriate for children so young, it was obvious that the children in my school were privy to, and even interested in, such discourse.

³ See Rutkowski, Miller and Campbell's 1981 article "The '6th Grade Singing Slump': Continuation of a Longitudinal Investigation" in *Desert Skies Symposium*, p. 99-111 and her references for the article.

This was not the only incident in which the students' expression of music seemed to be beyond their age. The inappropriateness of some music they chose revolved around the lyrics of the song. As a teacher, I could not allow students to sing or listen to music with lyrics with unsuitable language or topics. Even when students were not singing "the bad parts" (as pointed out by one of my students) of songs, I would stop their singing and remind them that it was not appropriate for their age or school. I know that did not keep them from singing or listening to the music at home or with their friends, but I unfortunately could not allow their free expression of these types of songs because of standards of teacher conduct.

One incident involved a four-year-old pre-kindergarten student who was singing as she was walking down the hall. At first, I could not discern what song she was singing because it sounded like nonsense syllables. While I was listening to her sing "rah rah rah rah rah," I suddenly put the syllable together with the melody and realized that it was the beginning of Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance." I was shocked that a four year old was familiar with the song, as Lady Gaga's lyrics are of an adult and provocative nature. However, Lady Gaga is often on television and the radio, making her a popular culture icon that few are unfamiliar with. Also, it was the melody and general sound of the song, not the words, which the girl had remembered. At her age, it was the ubiquity of Lady Gaga's music, rather than an affinity for the song's message, that made her familiar with the song.

Through our lessons, I became aware that students often had connections to music that would not be thought to be connected to their generation, but to those of their parents or grandparents. Because the boys and girls were musically outgoing,

they enjoyed sharing the music they loved in class. When lessons were centered on sharing, the minutes flew by and students wanted to have more time to share. One lesson revolved around them sharing music that represented themselves or their family. Students gave reasons that the music represented themselves. Often, students would point to emotions portrayed in the songs, or things they felt they admired or had in common with the artists. This is how we discovered a school fondness for Michael Jackson songs. Students knew the “Thriller” song and dance by heart and had performed it for a talent show the year before. Due to his recent death and reemergence on television, students felt very connected to his music, even though they were much too young to have seen and heard him in his prime. Students also had connections to the music of the Beatles, which I had at first doubted that they had heard. Through popular media, to which students have ample access, the Beatles are made new to them through the use of their songs in commercials, specifically a Blackberry™ commercial that used a remake of the song “All You Need is Love,” Sheryl Crow’s remake of the song “Here Comes the Sun” in the *Bee Movie*, and exposure to many of the songs through the new release of the Beatles *Rock Band* game. This all came to light through our preparation of a Beatles-themed winter concert.

Students’ expression of music was observed not only in the classroom, but also in the halls, playground, and even on a school bus to a field trip. Overall, their expressions seemed spontaneous in the sense that they would sing whenever they had the feeling to do so, but only once can I recall any student sharing a song that they themselves had made up. For example, a fourth-grade student suddenly burst out with

Jay Sean's "Down," singing "Baby are you down, down, down, down..." while performing a few moves from the music video. His classmates smiled and laughed, but no one saw the outburst as an unacceptable time or place for that musical expression. The song was very popular at the time and most students were familiar with it, so it was not surprising to hear it at school. On the playground, girls performed singsong clapping and jump rope games, many of which I was familiar with in my youth, such as "Miss Mary Mack." All of the girls I talked to said that they had learned the song from a friend, sister, cousin, or other relative. It was only on the long bus ride home from a field trip that a student shared a playground clapping game and rhyme that she had made up. The rhyme went "count, count, count as high as you can, but if you say five, you will be disqualified" and the players had to count from one as high as they could, omitting any mention of numbers with five in them. From my interaction with students in class regarding improvisation, it is not surprising to me that only one student all year shared a song that they had made up. Primary students, who should be the least inhibited of all of my students, were fearful of trying to sing Doo-wop or even make up their own rhythms, instead relying on tonal and rhythmic patterns that we had performed in class. Even the most outgoing class of sixth graders was stumped when I invited them to compose their own rhythmic compositions, like the ones they had seen in *STOMP*. They needed much coaxing and coaching in order to realize that they had the skills necessary to make up music that they had never heard before. Despite that, it was obvious that they still relied on rhythmic patterns that we had explored in African music, and rhythms that

they had heard from the radio. Even from group to group, one could hear the familiar strains of similar clave-like rhythms.

When it came to dancing, it seemed even more difficult to elicit improvised responses. The students would much rather that I teach them a scripted, choreographed dance, than ask them to just dance to music or choreograph their own dance. When I assigned a project of choreographing a dance to a popular African song, “Sing Lo-Lo,” to a sixth-grade class, they moaned and complained that they “didn’t know how” and asked if I would teach them the dance that went with it, as we had done with a traditional West African dance earlier in the school year. They could not seem to cope with the fact that there was no prescribed dance for this particular song. When they finally started putting dance moves to the song, they used large pieces of dances from popular songs that they knew, like “You’re a Jerk,” “The Electric Slide,” and a dance they referred to as “The Chicken Walk.” The fourth grade class that was asked to choreograph a dance to a popular Egyptian song was much more creative in their approach, piecing together small movements to create a more original dance; however, they also did rely on popular dance songs, like “Stanky Legg.”

The hip hop dances from New Boyz’ “You’re a Jerk” and GS Boyz’ “Stanky Legg” were popular with many of the students in the school, no matter what their racial or musical background. Even students who listened almost exclusively to country music at home were familiar with these dances. Some days I would give the students free time to listen to music and dance or listen to music when they were completing a written assignment. Invariably, one of the first requests would be to

listen to the song “You’re a Jerk.” Many of the students would get up and dance in a circle using the dance moves from the video, which included a crouch and kick that was reminiscent of those found in Cossack dances, but slower and far less athletic-looking. The dance also involved a move that looked like the dancer was skipping backwards, which proved to require quite a bit of coordination to look natural, as many of the students could not master it. When it came to the execution of this dance move, students would argue over its correct form, and there were times when the class would become divided into those that could do the dance, and those that could not. Those who could not would often sit instead of participating, and were outsiders to this cultural expression in the school. It became as if being able to perform “The Jerk” was a form of cultural currency, in order to buy acceptance into this club of students. The discourse around the “Stanky Legg” was very similar. The dance move required the dancer to put his leg out front and to the side with a bend and rotate the leg around the hip joint so that the leg appeared long and loose. While a simple move in concept, many students found it difficult to make the move look “cool” or natural, and arguments would occur when students who were doing it “the right way” would tell those who were doing it “the wrong way” to stop what they were doing because it was wrong. Students seemed to treat the ability to perform these dance moves as innate, in that once the dance move had been seen or taught, one either could or could not perform it. A similar “coolness” level was ascribed to the proper execution of this dance move as “The Jerk,” and outsiders were asked not to join in the dancing. In fact, the students would not even ask me to join, since as a cultural outsider (being old and a teacher), it was assumed I could not perform the dances, and students would

respond to my attempts by saying “Mrs. Strab, you can’t do it!” With dancing, it was made clear that you either belonged, or you did not.

How Students Think About Music

While the job of a music educator includes teaching students ways to think and talk about music, including teaching standard music vocabulary, listening techniques, and sensitive ways to critique music, the job of a music ethnographer is to discover how informants talk and think about music. As someone who filled both of these roles, I had to balance learning about my students’ ways of thinking about music against “correcting” their ways in order to conform to a standard music curriculum. I had to be sensitive to their cultural ways of thinking about music, and like most classroom teachers, I had to choose which battles needed fighting.

Because of their age and because of the influence of popular culture, their favored way of describing a song that they liked was to say “it has a good beat.” While this phrasing is abundant in the current generation of school-going children, I know it is not particular to just their age group, as the phrase was coined in the 1950s on *American Bandstand*. I found that trying to get them to refer to the rhythm was a losing battle. Students identified the beat as the synthesized electric bass and drum rhythms of a song and favored bass-heavy dance rhythms. These “beats,” when students chose to describe them, were recounted in their beatbox rendition. To the students, there seemed no need to describe the rhythm, when they could just say the rhythm, even though they had learned words about timbre, tempo, and syncopation, as well as rhythm literacy in class.

What was most surprising to me was how the students defined styles of music. For example, almost everything that they listened to, they described as “Rap,” even though a label of “hip hop” would be more fitting, since most of the songs they referred to included rapping, singing, scratching, and synthesized instruments. Students also used the term “rap” to refer to beatboxing, as well as the more standard definition of rhythmic speaking. I found myself surprised by the number of students who, when I asked them to share a rap, would beatbox, and I could not help but correct them. After similar incidents happened with several students in different classes, I came to realize that for them, the speaking and beatboxing that was part of rap music were inseparable in their definition.

Even though I realized that I had to let them continue using the terminology that they were used to, it was much harder for me to keep from correcting their views and attitudes toward other cultures. This was partly due to my time studying other cultures in ethnomusicology classes, as well as my undergraduate research in the ability of multicultural music education to change students’ attitudes toward cultures for the better. One of the first obstacles that I came across was the students’ unwillingness to sing songs in languages other than English. In late September, I introduced the students to music from Mexico, including Mariachi. Through a writing assignment, I encouraged students to reflect on their responses to the music, whether or not it was their first time hearing it. I was not surprised that many students had not heard it before, but that those who knew nothing of it described the music in bitter terms, or even said that they hated it. Students said that it was “noisy.” “sounded bad,” or did not seem “fun.” When asked what they thought of when they heard the

music, the students unfamiliar with the music wrote “nothing,” or unpleasant things like “cats screaming.” Students who had heard the music before often said that it made them think of “tacos.” Those most familiar with the music, Latino students in the class, usually responded that it made them think of a song or story that they knew that they were able to connect to the music.

Even though I could not make students like the music, I tried to educate them about what the music was about and how for many people it was very popular. I tried to make them understand that if someone told them that he did not like their favorite music, that they might take issue with it, especially if that person could not come up with reasons why he did not think it was good music. In another lesson, I taught them the words and meaning of “El Jarabe,” and had them sing it in Spanish. Most students were against learning a song in Spanish, because “this is America, and we speak English.” I assumed that they had heard similar phrases on television or from their parents because of debates about the use of Spanish on signs and documents in the United States. However, I was concerned not with their repetition of the phrase, but with the fact that their attitudes had been so firmly decided on the matter. It made my job of teaching them the song much more difficult. I found that if I took the time to explain the words to them, they became much more interested, especially when I called on their Spanish-speaking classmates to answer questions about the meanings of words. They began to realize how much their peers and their teacher, myself, knew about the Spanish language, and were amazed when we used it conversationally, not as just a novelty or for one word. Many students were aware of only a few words in Spanish, like *taco* or *hola*. To me, this was not very surprising. However, when

during a lesson I was explaining the meaning of some Spanish words, I had a student ask me the meaning of the word *margarita*. I responded that it meant daisy, and was also a girl's name. The students responded, "no, the drink. Have you ever had one, Mrs. Strab?" to which I had to reply that that topic was not appropriate for class, since we had a song to learn. It was then that I realized that many of my students had only paid attention to Spanish words when they were at Mexican restaurants. Because of the way they viewed music in their own lives, it was very difficult to teach them to realize that Mariachi music was part of a culture that may value different types of music, and that while it was for entertainment purposes in a restaurant, its traditions and musical meanings may mean more than just a preference for "weird" music.

For the most part, my students regarded music as something to be consumed, almost literally. Music was to be enjoyed for a period of time, and then dismissed and forgotten. The music that they most favored, the hits on the radio, was fleeting, and to them, the lyrics were not of central importance. Most students confessed that they did not pay attention to the lyrics of songs at all. Even if they did learn the words, they never gave a thought to what they might mean or signify. So, often when I asked them to refrain from singing or playing songs with curse words or sexual or violent lyrics, they seemed puzzled. I had to explain to students that it was not that I did not like the music or thought the music itself was bad, but that because of the lyrical content, it was something we could not listen to or sing in school. I had to remind students, "if you wouldn't say it to the principal, then don't sing it!"

In one incident, some of the girls who were staying after school for choir were singing popular songs while waiting for other students to arrive for rehearsal. They

were singing a popular Rihanna song called “Rude Boy,” that was new on the radio. After I told them to stop singing, I asked them if they knew why I had asked them to stop and if they knew what the words meant. One of the girls replied frankly, “I don’t really pay any attention to the words, I just sing the song.” This put into perspective for me the relationship that my students have with music. While the music has a place in their culture, they do not try to consciously ascribe any meaning to the lyrics of the song. For them, the music is either “good” or “bad,” based on their aesthetic values and how it fits into their ideas of what is popular at the time.

How Students Consume Music

Students often talked about the music that they heard on the radio, however they participated in music from many different sources. By getting to know my students and their interests, I was able to identify the sources that were the greatest contributors to their musical knowledge, and discovered that those sources codified the cultural impact of their choices.

Students’ families were one of the most influential factors in their musical choices, but this was one of the most overlooked sources when the students were talking about music. For example, it took much prodding to get a student to realize the reason that she liked calypso music was because she had family in Trinidad and connected listening to that music with being with her family on vacation and getting to dance around to the music. Students with family members who were music makers preferred their loved ones’ music and musical style over other artists or other styles. For example, one student had a cousin who was a rising country singer, while another

student had a grandfather who was an established go-go musician, and yet another had a father who produced Christian music. They spoke often of the music their family made, and expressed a desire to share it with the class and a wish that we could “do more music like that” in class.

Most students did not have family who were actively involved in the music industry, so they were less aware of how their family’s interests affected their own. Even though most students were in touch with current popular music, students also described how they listened to music in the car with their families. The most popular choices were hip hop or country music, followed by a minority that often listened to Christian music or music from their cultural backgrounds, such as Calypso or rancheros. Students' preferences that seemed to follow stereotypical racial lines (with white students the only ones interested in country music, and African-American students more interested in hip hop) seemed to make more sense when put into the perspective that students were often listening to their parents’ music. The fact that students were also listening to music that seemed too risqué or adult for them also made more sense when I considered that if their parents do not filter their own music consumption while their children are around, then students will also consume this adult music, especially when it is on the radio.

Like many Americans, students most often consume music in a seemingly passive manner through radio and television. They are of course making the choice of which channel to listen to or watch, but are at the mercy of what disc jockeys and producers think they should hear. This lends to a surprising diversity of styles and eras of music of which students are made aware, even though they still have gaps in

their music knowledge because of their age. Television and movies were the most unanticipated sources of music that students were familiar with. What was most shocking was that students remembered the music well after they had seen a show or heard music in a commercial. This led me to question just how passive a mode of reception radio-listening or television-watching was for my students, and what I observed is that students are anything but passive when it comes to these modes of music consumption. This may explain why they have such good memories for these fleeting forms of music exposure.

The most poignant example of their great musical memories being responsible for a wider diversity of music familiarity was with the kindergarteners at my school. When it came time for the winter concert, for which I had chosen a Beatles' theme, I assumed that they would be unfamiliar with the music. I chose for them to sing "Here Comes the Sun" because of its repetitive nature and simple melody. Unbeknownst to me, nearly all of the students claimed that they knew the song, and they started calling it the "Bee Song." I asked a student, "what does this song have to do with bees?" She replied, "It's in the *Bee Movie*." Later, I looked up the movie online, and sure enough, Sheryl Crow had covered the song for the movie, which had been in theatres a few years before.⁴ However, when I asked the students if they owned the movie (thinking that I could show them that part of the movie in class), none of them claimed to own it. This led me to believe that the students could not have seen the movie more than a few times, but for some reason the music in the movie had become integral to the memory of their experience of the movie, so much so that I could not

⁴ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Here_Comes_the_Sun

get my students to call the song anything but the “Bee Song.” This Beatles song from 1969, even without my intervention, had become part of their sonic memory.

Students were also familiar with songs much older than those of the Beatles because of what they were able to learn from television. *That’s so Raven* is a Disney Channel series that features teen singer and actress Raven-Symoné. As many of my students watch the Disney Channel because of its content that is geared toward young viewers, many were also familiar with the show. When introducing my students to the Duke Ellington classic “It Don’t Mean a Thing,” a student mentioned that she had seen Raven performing the song on her show. The next class, I played a clip from the show with Raven and Della Reese singing a traditional arrangement of the song, similar to the one they had heard in class before. Other students chimed in that they had also seen the episode, but had not realized that it was a Duke Ellington song or that the song had any history. Because I was able to play a clip from YouTube of the television show, this helped them relate to the song more.

The current generation of elementary school students, besides its increased interaction with popular media via television, is also known for its comfort in using and even reliance on modern technologies, especially those that allow them to be entertained wirelessly. They not only carry cell phones, but cell phones that can surf the internet, putting them in constant connection with popular music, even when they are away from their laptops or portable video game devices. One of the sites most visited by my students (especially when they should have been completing work for my class or another class) was YouTube. By the time students reached second or third grade, they were all very familiar with the site, and often asked to browse it or tried to

sneak on to it when the teacher was not watching. Unlike my own generation, which relied on MTV for our popular video watching, my elementary school students rely on YouTube to see the latest music videos. This allowed me to use YouTube in many new ways in lessons to reach my students, and also let me gain more insight on how my students found new music for themselves.

As mentioned before, students often spent free time at home and whatever time they could sneak in at school visiting YouTube. Most frequently, they used the site to have on-demand access to popular music. Students would show me videos like Chris Brown's "I Can Transform Ya," or Owl City's "Fireflies." Students had heard these songs on the radio, and had then sought them out on YouTube. Some students listened to the same song over and over again, as in the case of one student who after school was allowed time on the computer and played "Fireflies" over and over. When I asked him about it, he said "I don't know why, I just really like this song and I never get tired of it." Some students used YouTube's suggested videos and search functions to find videos and music that they would otherwise never have been aware of. On one of our free music days that I used as rewards, students asked if I could play a song called "Trapped in the Drive-Thru," even though they did not know it was by Weird Al Yankovic. Students laughed at the video, which gave me the chance to teach them about parody and explain that the song was meant to make fun of the R Kelly song, "Trapped in the Closet." Students had not only been unfamiliar with Weird Al, but also with the idea that someone could make money taking popular songs and changing them.

Students were also entertained by the idea of the possibility of being on YouTube. Some students showed me videos of themselves on the site. One in particular was proud of his rendition of Bob Marley's "Buffalo Soldier" that his cousin had recorded in his parents' minivan. I was surprised that the student was familiar with Bob Marley and his music, but it seemed obvious that it had been his parents' choice in car trip music. His peers were excited that they had a YouTube star in their midst, and were just as excited to be filmed singing as well. Whenever a camera was present the students did not shy away, and even asked if the video could be posted on YouTube. The answer was always no because of district privacy policies, but students never stopped asking.

As tuned into technology and music as my students generally were, there was one medium where they surprisingly elected to tune out music. While video games like *Rock Band* had indeed introduced them to music of another generation, in general this generation did not connect video games and music. When I asked students what musical activities they had participated in over winter break, they described singing carols, watching the musical celebrations before the ball dropped, or listening to their iPods. Many students said they had done nothing musical. This was something that I just could not believe. Students said that all they had done was play video games. When I asked them what the music was like on their video games, many students responded that they played with the music off (turning it off in the game settings) or played with the volume off entirely (so no sounds could be heard). Some of the students gave the reason that the music was annoying or repetitive. I asked whether they missed the cues that the music provided, having recently read many articles on

video game theory and video game music. Many of the students were not at all conscious of the cues that the music would tell them, such as when a big battle was coming up. They were perfectly content to play with the music off or ignore it completely.

Overall, I discovered how my students' musical consumption was directly affected by their technology use. The more plugged in they were with the different mediums of radio, television, the internet, and video games, the wider and more diverse their musical exposure and familiarity was. While in general students were unpredictably attentive to the music that they consumed in conjunction with television and film, and very adventurous in their searches on YouTube, they were generally opposed to music intruding on their video game experiences.

My students' musical culture was more diverse and complex than I could have guessed before spending a year observing them and getting to know them. Without encouraging them to discuss music in their own terms, I would have never gleaned how they perceived music and its role in their lives. As a teacher whose ultimate goal was to better reach my students in order to further their musical knowledge, it would have been wrong of me to assume that I could know anything about their musical culture by only associating them with popular music trends for their age group or looking only at their demographics. While both of these things played a part in the music that they interacted with, it was only a small portion of what made up their musical culture. By getting to know my students on more than a surface level through ethnographic methods, I was able to design lessons that appealed to how they perceived music, rather than how the curriculum said they should perceive music or

how I, as a teacher and someone outside of their musical culture, thought they might perceive music.

Answering Research Question 3

After getting to know my students, I had to ask myself how best to use the knowledge that I had gained. I have already given a few examples of how some of my lessons were altered to cater toward my students' technological and entertainment preferences, but further altering and creativity was needed to write lessons with which my students could connect. Like most teachers, my school district provided me with a curriculum that I was expected to follow. The curriculum, however, was not designed to take students' cultural backgrounds into consideration, and indeed did not provide much guidance on how to teach music from non-Western cultures. For me, this meant that I had to bend the timing, focus, and even the content of the curriculum to be able to include lessons on diverse cultures or give students the opportunity to express themselves in their own way. Below are some examples of lessons where I put my knowledge of my students to use in the way I taught lessons.

As mentioned previously, my students enjoyed dancing very much. They were excited to show me dance moves that they learned from popular music videos. When I tried to teach them traditional dances from diverse cultures, however, they were very hesitant to put as much enthusiasm into their dance steps and learning the songs, and even found the dance moves embarrassing, creating a lot of laughter in the classroom. In a lesson on a traditional Ghanaian Agahu dance (the song and dance steps were a part of their graded series of books), the best that I could do to encourage

them was to compare the dance steps they were learning to dance steps they were already familiar with, but this sometimes backfired, especially when I likened one move to the “chicken dance” popular at weddings. Since we were in the middle of a unit on African musics, I decided to reevaluate my approach to dance for these students. The next song we learned was a popular song “Sing-Lo-Lo” by Senegalese artist Vieux Diop, but this time I had the students choreograph the song on their own. At first they wanted me to teach them the “right” dance moves; however, I told them that there were no traditional dance moves for the song, and that they could make up whatever dance moves they like, since it was a popular song like they would hear on the radio. The students, although shy about creating their own dance, were excited to share ideas about dance moves that they knew could be part of their collective dance project. Because I was able to modify my lesson approach using a participatory action research model, I was able to design a lesson that my students were more connected to.

Students were generally more in tune with current hip hop than with 1970s Rhythm and Blues, so when I designed a unit around the song “Lean on Me,” by Bill Withers, I decided to bring in elements of hip hop to continue to hold the students' interest in performing the song and learning about musical form. After students learned the version of the song in the book, we mapped out the form of the verses in a simple ABABCB pattern. Then, I had them listen to 2-4 Family's hip hop version of the song, which expanded the form to include rap verses and repeating choruses, so they had a more complete understanding of how to identify the sections of the form and to realize that even though songs do not always follow the same pattern, that did

not necessarily mean that the 2-4 Family version was not “Lean on Me.” Over the next few lessons we rehearsed the song, wrote our own rap verses, and created our own form for the song, which culminated in a final class performance with instruments. The students were excited to be creating, especially using what they knew about rap and poetry, in order to make something that was their own, and in a style with which they identified.

In my previous discussion of my lesson on the Duke Ellington song “It Don’t Mean a Thing,” I mentioned that I had shown the class a clip from a popular children’s television series, *That’s So Raven*. While most of the students were familiar with this show, the style of the music was something that many of them did not identify with. Most students would not put jazz or Swing on their list of favorite types of music. Most of them identified with pop (which is the style usually found in *That’s So Raven*) or hip hop. Many of the students also claimed to like go-go, which is a music local to Washington DC, a city with which my students identify, being that it is the closest urban center. Because I knew of their familiarity with go-go, I also had them listen to Chuck Brown’s “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If it Don’t Have the Go-Go Swing).” The student who was related to Chuck Brown was proud of his family’s contribution to the lesson, and the students were listening more attentively. I was able to draw their attention more easily to the swing rhythm and the instrumentation. We were then able to compare and contrast the Duke Ellington and Chuck Brown versions so that they could better understand what made each version of the song a notable example of its respective genre.

Besides incorporating familiar styles and songs, I also incorporated learning through the media they were most used to in dealing with music. My students were often not successful with activities which required them to sit still or reflect while listening to music attentively, since this was not a way that they interacted with music in their daily lives. Students were more attentive to music when a visual element was added, such as with music videos. Videos like *Animusic* and *STOMP* helped me teach students about musical instruments and rhythm, respectively, by keeping them engaged in the music both aurally and visually. Because they were more attentive, they retained more knowledge and were more engaged in follow-up activities that required them to be creative, such as designing a new instrument or creating their own composition with found objects. I also used YouTube videos whenever I could to interest students, as in our unit on Beatles' music. Students were also fond of the interactive lessons found on educational websites. They were able to exercise their technology skills by composing music, writing short essays that included pictures on famous jazz musicians, or learning about sound and music through using the science and math skills with which they were familiar. They were able to think about music in a way that was fun, and yet academically-centered (which was a skill that we had to work on all year). Creating songs with instrumental loops using Garage Band software let them learn about composition in a way that they could relate to, because it was a system closer to contemporary popular music production, rather than writing music at a piano. Even introducing them to music video games on the computer helped them relate music to the technology, in order to make learning both fun and

pedagogically relevant. Music literacy was always the goal, but a foot-in-the-door lesson helped make the curricular goals seem possible and worthwhile to them.

Just because all of my lessons did not focus on or incorporate the music or cultural expression, did not mean that I did not try to reach my students on some type of cultural middle ground. One of the easiest ways to help them understand music history was to bring in references to popular artists of whom they were aware. During a unit on Mozart, students laughed at his clothes and could not comprehend the importance of his having a career at such a young age. So, instead of making Mozart seem so foreign to them, I compared him with Michael Jackson, whose life and career had been retold on television since his recent death. I compared Mozart's early tours with his sister to tours that Michael Jackson did with his brothers, and discussed how they both were known in many countries, and how despite making a lot of music and making money from it, they both died young and with debts. Students came to relate to the story of Mozart much better this way, rather than thinking of him as a child genius who wore funny clothes and wrote music that they did not think of as "popular." I would also reference successful female singers like Beyoncé and Rihanna in comparison to Ella Fitzgerald or Billy Holiday. Referencing how popular artists made records also got students interested in recording projects and helped them understand that there were many people who made their favorite stars' careers possible. During a unit on recording technology and process, I had them step into the shoes of their favorite artist while recording, and be a famous producer in creating a finished product, complete with cover art. Making a CD was something more productive to them, rather than writing a "composition."

All in all, the multitude of ways that I incorporated what I knew about my students into a culturally relevant pedagogy are too numerous to count. In each lesson I strove to appeal to how they thought about music, whether it was in a major way through a lesson planned around cultural modes of expression, or in small ways like making cultural references that they would recognize. The most important thing that I learned about being able to use the information in order to transform my teaching was to utilize the data in a timely manner. If a student revealed a bit of cultural insider knowledge to me, I was best able to put it to use if I used it in lessons in the upcoming week or weeks. I was allowed to do this because my district's curriculum allowed some flexibility on when concepts and skills were taught throughout the school year. Even if I had written the information down in a journal, I might not have come back to an idea that I had for a lesson and incorporate it. It was best if I jotted a note in my lesson planner about the lesson idea that I had, rather than just keep a journal about observations on my students. That is not to say that I did not look back at my notes or remember events at a later date and get lesson ideas then, but it was far easier to use many of the smaller tidbits of insider knowledge in small ways in lessons that were in the immediate future, and to have a record of the references I wanted to make or come back to with bigger ideas to form units around. Whether used as the basis for a unit, or as only one comment in a lesson, any way I could make my methodology to teaching students more approachable culturally was one more step toward a personalized pedagogy, despite my own outsider status and the demands of the curriculum.

Answering Research Question 4

As a first year teacher, I was starting from scratch when it came to learning the curriculum, learning about my students, and creating lesson plans. In a way, this gave me an advantage over a veteran teacher, since I was comparing how different approaches to the curriculum worked. In my teacher preparation program, we focused solely on creating developmentally appropriate lessons; lessons that students could physically execute, and be able to comprehend based on their age or level of musicianship. Only my research into culturally relevant pedagogies and my master's work in Ethnomusicology prepared me to take into account the culture of my students when preparing lessons. Throughout the school year, I could compare the effectiveness of the age-relevant materials and techniques found in the curriculum with the relevant materials and techniques that I was introducing into the curriculum.

The curriculum was structured to build on knowledge and skills starting from Pre-Kindergarten to sixth grade. Lessons were meant to build upon skills and age-appropriate songs in the graded series. Nothing about the district curriculum was designed around the students' culture, except perhaps for the fact that most songs were from a European and American tradition, which typifies American music education but may not typify the students being taught. By introducing music and lessons that appealed to the cultural knowledge my students had, I could take the district-provided curriculum and make it more responsive to my students' culture.

While using developmentally appropriate materials like our graded series, or techniques such as learning by rote for younger students or creating games for older students, I helped students stay engaged in lessons because the lessons were neither

too difficult nor too easy for them, I found that culturally relevant lessons elicited an even higher level of engagement from students. When the music had a connection to the students, whether it be a style they were familiar with or a new song was made more familiar through seeing one of their favorite television stars perform it, they performed with more enthusiasm in the classes following the culturally relevant instruction. Listening to Raven and Chuck Brown resulted in students putting in more effort to learn “It Don’t Mean a Thing,” while students were in awe of the connection between two prominent figures in the Washington DC area. They felt more connected to the song, and it showed in the days following the more culturally relevant parts of the lesson. Watching a video narration of a book on Duke Ellington, and seeing a black and white video of Ella Fitzgerald singing the song, had nowhere near as profound an effect as watching Raven or listening to Chuck Brown. When technology was introduced to get the students composing, they would spend the class with eyes glued to their computer screen and ears intently listening to their compositions, instead of talking to their classmates about other subjects while their pencil and paper lay in front of them. Their attention to the lessons I created with them in mind made learning easier for them and teaching less stressful for me.

While the level of engagement increased, so did the level of excitement. When the students got a chance to write their own rap or create their own record, they came to class every day ready to get working and asking what was next. When we ran out of time at the end of class, some students expressed their desire to stay and work on their project or sing the song one more time. Songs that would otherwise not have been interesting to them became their favorite songs. Unlike many of the soon-

forgotten songs that they learned as part of age-centered curriculum, songs like “Lean on Me” and “Yellow Submarine” became favorites throughout the entire school.

Throughout the school year, students asked again and again if we could sing “Lean on Me,” because the experience of creating their own hip hop version made the song something special for them, and many students wanted to sing “Yellow Submarine” after getting to watch parts of the cartoon and a short biopic on the Beatles that I framed by comparing them to the Jonas Brothers. From creating major projects and productions to simply referencing teen pop culture icons, the connections my students made to the music took their excitement for performing to new heights.

During the specially designed lessons, my students were also more responsive to the class discussion. It seems to be obvious that students would love the chance to talk about themselves and their interests, but so little of the curriculum is framed around the students getting to do so. While it may at first seem to be of little educational value, when properly framed, student discussion of their lives and interest can be very educational, both musically and linguistically. By challenging my students to use the music terminology and descriptive vocabulary that they had learned in my class and in other teachers’ classes, we added depth and value to our class discussions. Students also had a chance to learn about culture in a way that they never could before; students were in an atmosphere where their “different” experiences were prized more than fitting in. They were free to talk about the music that they listened to only with their family, or only with their friends, or even only by themselves, knowing that I would not tolerate their peers teasing them. Some students revealed that they listened to music from other countries such as Mexico or Trinidad,

and their peers (who had been attending school with them for years) were surprised and interested. By opening up a comfortable dialog about music and culture in class, students were more responsive in discussions as the school year progressed, whether or not the dialog was focused on them or on music, and whether or not the music was something from their daily lives or something from the standard curriculum.

As my students became more engaged, excited, and responsive in class, they also became better behaved in general. Understanding my students' interests and fusing those interests into the curriculum gave them less time for their minds to wander during class, but also let me develop effective reward systems to utilize in class. This is what led me to include YouTube “free time” classes as a reward for the students being well-behaved and finishing their work. Their other teachers had rewarded them with stickers, pencils, pizza parties, and other material prizes, but never the chance to direct the class content or to express themselves through song and dance. Students responded to the novelty and the way that the inclusion of familiar technology showed how I was willing to bridge the student-teacher culture gap. Subsequently, students responded more warmly to me, were more open about themselves and their music, and were willing to put forth more effort in lessons with me. When they were rewarded, so was I, as it let us be more productive in lessons, even when those lessons may not have been the most appealing to my students.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

By the end of my study, I had learned much that year as an ethnographer and as a teacher. One of the biggest challenges I faced was the balance between those two roles. I had to tread the line between being an ethnographer invested in the project, and a teacher invested in my students. I experienced a process that Thomas Porcello likens to “moving the faders up and down on the console” (1998:489). I had to search for the best possible mix of these two positions when in the classroom, and while analyzing the day’s, week’s, month’s, or year’s events. Looking back, there were moments in the classroom where I approached the encounter as an ethnographer, and found myself making observations or questioning my students in order to learn interesting facts about their background or comparing what they thought about prior music studies. My revelations about my students intrigued me. As a teacher, I listened to their music-making or discourse with a critical ear, searching for errors that I could correct, or learning about them so that I could make lessons that they would enjoy and find success in. Some days my balance worked and I was equally successful at being an ethnographer and a teacher, which is not to say that I was equally active as both, and some days I was woefully unproductive as one or both, as Porcello alludes to in his own research (ibid.:490).

While I have defined my roles as ethnographer and teacher, and have referred to my roles as observer and participant, I found it unhelpful in both action and

analysis to think of myself fixedly in those subject positions. I was first and foremost living side-by-side with my students, sharing music and learning experiences; the encounters were too dynamic for me to be fixedly ethnographer or teacher, participant or observer, teacher or learner. Nevertheless, those discreet roles make it easy to discuss the types of knowledge I was able to gain through the process of the study, so I will discuss what I learned through the lens of an ethnographer and as a teacher.

What I Learned as an Ethnographer

I approached my first two research questions, —Are ethnographic methods of data collection useful for teachers of general music in order to be knowledgeable about the students they are teaching?— and —What types of ethnographic knowledge can teachers discover about their students’ musical culture?— as an ethnographer. I was concerned with what kind of information I could discover and how I would do so. I believe that the depth and breadth of data I presented in the last chapter demonstrates that the ethnographic methods I used were effective. Relying on participant observation and giving up using formal interviews in favor of class discussion and reflective writing lessons helped me provide a framework for the types of information students would share, but also let them take a leading role in where the discussion went. I do not believe that missing formal interviews took away from the amount of knowledge I would have gained.

The rapport I had with my students was a product of the positive environment I fostered in my classroom and the inherent trust that comes from a positive teacher/student relationship. If anything, interviews would have been more than just

too time-consuming; they would have set up a researcher/subject relationship that would have created distance between me and my students. In her study of playground music, Marsh found that many students would not give her the whole story about a song because they viewed her as an outsider and were afraid of what she might think or find appropriate, and only after spending time with them and having them watch their recordings did they become more open and honest with her (2008:57). Unlike Marsh, I found my position as a teacher to make me more of an insider, instead of magnifying my position as “other” (ibid.:55). Many of my students showed their love for me through hugs and by sharing with me details about their daily lives. If it had not been for their trust and openness, this project would not have been successful.

When it came to gathering visual data or incidental audio data, I had to act in a role of a more passive observer. I had to detach myself from my role as teacher and music participant in order to widen my view of my surrounding environment. I found this the most challenging because I did not view being an ethnographer as my primary role, and because of the hectic nature of being a first year teacher. My mind was inundated with learning hundreds of students’ names, lesson planning, and grading. Teachers do not usually have a lot of “down-time” during the day, having to constantly look after students, especially young ones. Half of the school year was over before I felt comfortable stepping back to observe my students in such a way that I could notice details such as the musicians on their book bags or binders, rather than trying to remember their name or focusing on getting them to walk to the correct side of the hall. It may have profited my research more, or at least helped it to

develop more quickly, if I had made more of an effort to be an “outside” observer more often.

I was thus able to discover my students' favorite types of music, their family backgrounds, and what they thought about rhythm, but through their openness and enthusiasm for sharing, the students themselves led me to discoveries about how they interacted with technology and how they perceived gender and sexuality. Through the means that I employed, I believe I was able to get a very complete picture of their cultural sphere of music. Although in the previous chapter I referred to how children express, think about, and consume music, it may be more beneficial to view their culture through an adaptation of Arjun Appadurai’s paradigm of “scapes” (1990). In his essay, Appadurai stresses the flow that happens in and between ethnoscaples, ideoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, and finanscapes in a global economy (ibid.:301), but these “scapes” can be applied to other communities. The data from the previous chapter can fill in these “scapes,” excepting the last one, finanscape, which I collected little data on, perhaps because children my students age are generally less aware of the financial world and are just beginning to understand the value of money. The strict policies regarding uniforms, that no book bags were carried around school, and no toys or electronics were allowed in school were equalizing factors in how students displayed wealth.

Their musical ethnoscape consisted of the music and culture they identified with based on their family, location, and age; these expressions of culture refer to the section on how students express music. While Appadurai references political ideas and keywords when he refers to ideoscapes, for my purpose I am likening them to

their keywords and ideas about music, which can be found in the section on how students think about music. When they speak of beats, rapping, or Mexico, they have images or ideas that are particular to their culture and that may not align with adult cultural ideas. The students' mediascape was full of images and sounds from television, movies, and the Internet that were directed toward them. Children-centered media, like the Disney channel, which gave them idols like Miley Cyrus or Raven-Symoné, had played a major role in the music to which they were attuned. Their technoscape, which was full of the latest technology, including smart phones, laptops, and video game systems providing an almost-constant stream of media, giving them more opportunities to be influenced by popular media or discover unfamiliar music. This is perhaps why their musical familiarity was so wide-ranging, extending to genres and decades that would otherwise have been unknown to them. It also created music as a visual and aural experience, and students craved and thrived on experiences where I connected the visual to the aural. When put into the model of Appadurai's "scapes," it becomes apparent that their musical culture is its own complete and whole culture, specific to them, but something that is also shared with millions of others.

My students' musical culture is its own discreet sphere within the wider musical culture that surrounds them. While it is certain that my students' musical values will not stay the same and the repertoire of their culture will change, it has yet to be seen if this will fit Agawu's theory of a cultural continuum (1995). A longitudinal study would be necessary to find this out. However, I posit that because of the influence of ever-changing media and the rapid evolution of the technology

that delivers that media, Agawu's concept of a continuum may not be appropriate for American popular culture. While I can be sure that my students will generally leave the nursery rhymes and children's songs that are made part of the elementary curriculum, I am less sure that they will leave behind their preferences for hip hop and pop, or their concepts of rap as masculine and singing as feminine. Even as they grow in their musical knowledge, their dependence on technology and the ever-presence of the media will surely be great influences on their future musical culture. Their parents' music does not gain them access into a world of adulthood like a rite of passage, which is not to say that they will not come to appreciate more "adult" forms of music as they get older, but it is unlikely that their musical repertoire will mirror that of their parents.

The idea of musical culture on an evolving path is more apt than a continuum that simply spans childhood to adulthood. Because of this ever-evolving nature, made more rapid by technology, this study of my students is only a small sliver of a view into their musical culture. In all likelihood, the specific details of discoveries made through this research will have little to no relevance for future students at the same school.

What I Learned as a Teacher

Now that my experience in the field, for the scope of this project, is finished, my life and the lives of my students continue. During the school year we all learned many varying lessons. They discovered music they had never heard before, and I discovered the complexities of their musical life. Upon my return for the new school

year, excited with ideas for new lessons or changes to make old lessons better, I was struck by how much had changed from one year to the next. I had trouble thinking of the previous year's second-graders as third-graders this year. Subconsciously I think I was hoping that they would somehow be the same, but there were numerous reminders of how they had changed. Some students seemed to have grown two inches over the summer, many had new haircuts, and they all had new shoes, new book bags, and new notebooks. I had to wonder if these physical changes were the only signs of their evolution. Did they still like Miley Cyrus? Were songs from the *Alvin and the Chipmunks* movie still popular? There were some obvious musical absences. Last year's sixth graders, as well as "The Jerk" dance that they had performed, were notably absent. The new Kindergarten students were all abuzz about the Disney movie *Toy Story 3*. I had to ask myself, did that make what I had learned last year irrelevant? Did I need to throw out what I thought I knew about my students and begin the ethnographic process all over again in order to reach out to my current students?

I came to the conclusion that I did not have to start from scratch, but my research was far from over. This is why the heart of my ethnographic project was an action research paradigm. The cyclical nature of the action research process would continue past the completion date of my project as I continued to learn about my students, create lesson plans tailored to their culture, and revamp lessons that did not work or change previous lessons to be more successful for my students. This process is better suited for teachers than a discreet ethnographic project, because teachers continue to operate in "the field." Through many years of teaching, students change,

teachers change, and lessons that once were effective may no longer be so due to the effects of time. A teacher needs to be constantly in contact with how students think in order to meet their needs. This was the basis for the third and fourth research questions, “How can teachers incorporate this ethnographic knowledge of their students into appropriate teaching materials and techniques?” and “How do students respond to these materials and techniques, versus materials and techniques that are appropriate solely on the basis of age and musical development?”

In the previous chapter I discussed ways in which I was able to take what I knew about my students and create or change lesson plans to suit their particular values or skills. I think that it is important to reiterate that not every lesson was centered around their musical preferences or around new ideas that I had for projects that they would enjoy and find success in. In order to meet curricular goals, I used lessons that were designed without their culture in mind, and in the process of teaching those lessons, infused bits of their culture through terminology, analogies, or teaching strategies to hold their attention or to create connections in knowledge for them. For my own future use—and I also suggest this for other teachers—I plan to incorporate as little or as much of cultural material as makes sense for the goals of that particular lesson. Certain types of lessons which are centered on games, fun, or popular music can be used as rewards, while more traditional lessons that utilize culturally responsive strategies for structuring knowledge can still be a useful part of a successful pedagogy.

A product of a successful pedagogy was a class that was easier to teach and learn in. When my students were interested they learned better and behaved better,

giving a positive answer to my fourth research question. I measured my success as a teacher as depending on how well my students learned and how well the classroom ran. I was able to have a successful first year because both my students and I came to class excited. In order to assess how well I was able to meet my goal of creating a pedagogy that was responsive to my students' culture, I compared what I was able to accomplish to Geneva Gay's five elements of culturally responsive teaching (2002). As I already discussed, I was able to discover much about my students, fulfilling the first element: developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity. In the previous chapter, I also discussed how I was able to not only bring in material that was relevant to them, but to also infuse the curriculum with content from many different cultures, meeting the second standard of including ethnic and culturally diverse content in the curriculum. I was also able to demonstrate caring about students and building a learning community through fostering trust and a positive environment for my students. The fourth element, cross-cultural communication, was a part of our class discussions in which students shared about their culture or we made connections between their culture and the music we were studying. Finally, I was able to achieve cultural congruity in classroom instruction by welcoming the use of the terminology that my students were familiar with, but also introducing them to new terms for concepts they were familiar with. By demonstrating the place of these elements in my classroom and showing the positive response of my students to a curriculum designed with their musical culture in mind, the practice of implementing a culturally relevant pedagogy has a worthwhile constructive impact on the classroom as a whole.

Reflections and Summary

In general, this project demonstrated that it is not only possible, but also extremely beneficial, for music teachers to take on action research to get to know their students and create a pedagogy that is responsive to their cultural values. Not every teacher will be able to change or develop a curriculum, because of the different expectations in each school or district, but every teacher can develop teaching techniques or strategies that best suit their students' instructional needs, whether they be based on physical prowess, intelligence, or cultural values. A simple way of doing research into students' preferences may be as simple as listening to their favorite radio stations more often. Perhaps teachers need not write an entire ethnography, but keeping a journal of observations and lesson ideas will help teachers reflect on how they can implement ideas they have or how specific strategies worked. No matter the scope of the ethnographic inquiry, the effort is well worth the benefit for the teacher and the students, as I have shown.

While I considered my first year of teaching a success, there were also many failures and room for improvement. For a first year teacher to attempt researching an ethnography and developing a new curriculum and pedagogical style is imposing and at times was quite overwhelming. Because of this challenge, I know there are observations that went unrecorded, and I am sure that there were opportunities that went unnoticed. A more seasoned teacher would perhaps be able to keep more regular notes. While I gave myself an entire school year to collect data on my students, a longer period of study would allow me to see which trends were more stable and which were more fleeting. This is not to say that fleeting trends in popular music

should be ignored as an ethnographer or as a teacher. Even the most short-lived songs or artists can still be used as cultural capital with students. Also, no matter how hard I tried to make my lessons appeal to my students, there were students who did not respond to my attempts to relate to them. At the time, I attributed their disinterest and noncompliance with behavior issues that I alone could not solve. However, in retrospect, it may be that they did not fit in with their peers, and so my lessons were not as relevant to them.

In closing, through reflective ethnography and teaching, I was able to successfully create and implement a pedagogy that was tailored to my students' culture and skills so that they could be effective learners. By carefully balancing my roles as ethnographer and teacher, I was able to not only uncover interesting facts about my students' musical culture, but also use that information to be a more effective teacher of music. My students were eager and willing informants who led me to discover the intricacies of their particular musical culture. Nothing could have prepared me for the breadth of my students' musical interests or how distinct their views and values would be. Perhaps the most important lesson of the study was that as an adult and a teacher, any assumptions I had could not come close to the true nature or complexity of my students' musical culture.

Appendices

Appendix A

Our Musical School

A note regarding an upcoming project involving your student.

Dear Parent/Guardian,

As your student's music teacher, I am writing home in order to inform you of my Master's thesis project that involves your student here at Baden Elementary. For my project I will be writing about the musical culture of our school as a whole. As such, I will be taking notes about the musical behaviors of students at school, both in and out of music class. My notes will allow me to make generalizations about the musical culture at our school so that I can discuss my findings in my thesis. As a student at Baden, your child's musical behaviors may be part of the final thesis paper.

Rest assured that in my notes and thesis, no student will be mentioned by name or indicated in any way that would allow that child to be identified by a reader. You and your student's privacy is a top priority of the project. The results of my research will only be applied to discussing the culture of the school as a whole; no individual student or family will be researched.

Although many of the activities that will allow me to observe the school's musical culture are a normal part of your student's musical education in class, your student is in no way obligated to share any information he or she is not comfortable sharing and there will be no academic award or penalty for your student's participation or lack thereof. You or your student may at any time withdraw from participating in the project, in which case I will not discuss any observations of your student in my thesis.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me either by email (emily.strab@ppgeps.org) or call me at school at 302-888-1188.

Mrs. Strab

Please have your student return this form with your signature if you DO NOT want your student to be a part of this project.

I do not want my student, _____, to be included in observations or discussions of the musical culture of Baden Elementary in this thesis project.

Signed, _____

Printed: _____

RELEASE

2010-2011

PUBLICITY

Throughout the school year, the Board of Education of Prince George's County and individual schools within Prince George's County Public Schools will conduct activities that may be publicized through local or national news media. These activities may include interview sessions with news reporters; photographs of individual students or groups of students for newspapers or various school system publications including newsletters, calendars, and brochures; the use of student photos on the PGCPs Web site; and videotaping for local and national television news programs, cable programming, and school system promotional videos.

Please **check one** of the two statements below. **Sign and return** this document to your child's school.

I/we **grant permission** for my/our child's name, voice, and photographic likeness to be used by Prince George's County Public Schools personnel, or reporters, journalists, or photographers employed by news media.

I/we **do not give permission** for my child's name, voice, and photographic likeness to be used by Prince George's County Public Schools personnel, or reporters, journalists, or photographers employed by news media.

Child's Name

School

Signature of Parent(s) or Guardian(s)

Signature of Parent(s) or Guardian(s)

Date



Appendix C

Baden Elementary Winter Concert

Dear Parents/Guardians,

As the general and vocal music teacher for Baden Elementary, I am happy to announce that we will be holding a winter concert on December 16th, 2009 at 7:15 PM that will include general music students as well as the instrumental music students. Students from each grade will be learning songs from the Beatles to perform for the concert and for a school assembly on December 18th, 2009 at 9:45 AM. I realize, however, that some students may not be able to participate in the after-school concert.

Below is a form that will allow you to make your wishes clear about whether or not your child will participate in the after-school winter concert. The form must be returned by December 4th, 2009.

Thank you for your support and understanding, and I look forward to seeing you at the concert!

Sincerely,

Emily Strab
Vocal/general music teacher

Detach and return

I, _____, affirm that my student, _____ **WILL** perform in the winter concert at Baden Elementary on December 16th, 2009 at 7:15 PM, on the condition that they are musically and behaviorally ready to perform. I will be responsible for providing transportation to the concert and ensuring that s/he is dressed appropriately for the concert. I give consent for my student be video/audio-taped and photographed as part of the performance.

Signed, _____ Date _____

I, _____, affirm that my student, _____ **WILL NOT** participate in the winter concert on December 16th, 2009.

Signed, _____ Date _____

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