

Pathways to Culturally Informed Music Education: Lessons from the Gambia

A culturally informed approach to music education, based in the understanding of specific musical cultural practices, can contribute to American music education as music educators seek to deepen and broaden students' musical experiences, knowledge, and skills. Culturally informed music pedagogy can foster an understanding of music theory and practice that includes both the social and cultural context, and the actual experience, of making music through listening, singing, dancing and playing instruments. This type of theoretically grounded music education is crucial for education, according to educational philosophers and psychologists.ⁱ

The goal of culturally informed music education is to bring practice and theory together so that children can experience a connection to the culture and people who produced the music being studied. Theory alone is limited in its ability to transform educational experience. Likewise, simply engaging in musical experiences without understanding their meaning leads to music education that is limited in its expressive power or aesthetic value and ability to motivate students.^{ii, iii} Musical practice without theory can lead to misconceptions about cultures that can reinforce stereotypes. When theory and practice are combined in classroom musical experiences, the social and cultural context of music can lead to a richer and more valuable educational experience.

Music educators have embraced the idea of teaching music from around the world in American classrooms. However, researchers do not always agree about how to actually accomplish this, and the theoretical base of knowledge about teaching and learning world music is lacking. In particular, there has not been sufficient research into how music is taught and

learned in specific musical cultures and how this knowledge could be incorporated into American music education.

One concept which has been widely debated in world music education is the idea of 'authenticity.' While this concept has many definitions, it broadly refers to bringing social, cultural and historical background to music education. While recognizing that there is no one 'true' way to present a music experience in any culture, music educators have tried to include meanings, practices and objects that allow children to understand some of the context in which the music was created. This can include the use of instruments from the culture of origin instead of, or in addition to, the use of traditional music-room instruments. This practice has been shown to improve students' attitude, recall, and performance in world music education.^{iv} Incorporating such instruments can sometimes be prohibited by cost, and in these situations there are other ways to stay true to the meaning and context of the music. These include teaching children about the cultural context of the music, including asking who, where, when, why and how the music was produced.

While some scholars have disputed the concept of authenticity on theoretical grounds, Dr. Koops, a researcher at Case Western Reserve University, argues that the concept is valid as a means of bridging theory and practice. For her, authenticity requires that children learn how music is transmitted and what the music means, as a way of understanding both music and the lives of children in other cultures. Her research explores how music is learned and taught in other cultures and provides insight into improving culturally informed music education here in the United States.

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Dr. Lisa Koops is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Music at Case Western Reserve University. Her research aims to develop an approach to teaching elementary music that takes into account specific cultural elements of music from around the world. Her interest in culture and music practice led her to conduct fieldwork in the Gambia, where she researched children's music culture.

Dr. Koops' ethnography of children's music making and learning in the Gambia informs her current efforts to incorporate this information into the practice of general elementary music education as well as ongoing research on supporting children's development through playful music making.

SETTING

The Gambia is the smallest country on the mainland of Africa. Since achieving independence from the British in 1965, the country has remained relatively peaceful. Tourism, followed by agriculture, is the primary industry. English is the official language of the Gambia, but many other indigenous languages are spoken at home and in communities. Music in the Gambia emphasizes rhythmic expression and improvisational creativity. This richness and creativity is a part of everyday life, creating an environment in which children are encouraged and expected to be musical.

METHODS

This study of children's music making used ethnographic techniques such as cultural immersion and participant observation in addition to interviews and the collection of songs and chants. Dr. Koops collected audio- and video-recordings of children's music making and play. The study participants included 101 children and adults who lived in a neighborhood in a community which Koops calls "Baatikunda" (this is a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of her participants). Koops conducted participant observation with children age 5 to 13. This involved observing children during formal music education in school as well as during the playing of music games on the playground and at home. She also observed children participating in adult-centered music events. Children, older

siblings, parents and teachers were interviewed about children's music making.

FINDINGS

The study's main findings relate to three categories of children's music making: 1) What children do musically, 2) How children learn and teach music, and 3) The role and meaning of music in children's lives.

1. What children do musically refers to the form and content of children's music making activities. Dr. Koops observed that Gambian children expressed considerable amounts of agency (or power, control and authority) in their music making practices. However, she found that when children were in environments that were monitored or led by adults, such as school music classes or community performances, they exhibited less agency than they did in contexts when they had control over their music making, such as on the playground or at home. During such sessions, children exhibited control and agency through the choice and use of instruments, songs, dances and games.

2. How children learn and teach music refers to the ways in which music education occurs in both formal and informal settings. Dr. Koops found that children in the Gambia teach themselves music in a self-directed way by listening, observing, and partici-

pating in musical activities. She hypothesizes that they are able to do this because of three supportive factors: the rich musical environment of their community, the cultural expectation to be musical, and the motivation to learn inherent within playful musical activities and community music events.

3. The role and meaning of music in children's lives refers to the cultural importance of music and the ways in which children engage with it socially and culturally. Dr. Koops found that the central role of music in children's lives in the Gambia was as a means of enjoyment. She found that children often engaged in music joyfully, particularly in play. Music is also used for education, cultural understanding, communication and entertainment. Enjoyment of music was also part of these other roles and seemed to be related to the ways in which children were able to use music for participation, interaction and the exercise of agency.

These findings show interesting parallels with American children's music making. In particular, there are commonalities in two main areas: 1) the disconnect between the ways that children engage with

music inside and outside of the classroom, and 2) the importance of agency in children's music making.

COMMONALITIES BETWEEN AMERICAN AND GAMBIAN CHILDREN'S MUSIC MAKING

Music inside and outside of the classroom. Koops observed music making in schools and in the community. Within the school setting, she noticed that children participated more enthusiastically in music-making when they had more control over the situation. She also noted a disconnect between music inside and outside the classroom, a phenomenon which has also been observed in the United States.

Children's agency. Gambian children displayed control or ownership in their music making practices, in particular through the choice and use of language, decision-making, movement and attitude in singing, dancing, playing music games and playing instruments. These results mirror research on American children's playground cultures which shows that the playground is a place where children teach and learn music and feel a greater sense of ownership and control.^v

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE: **Culturally Informed Music Education at Case Western Reserve University**

Dr. Koops is putting her research to work in the Music Education Department. Supported by a Worldwide Learning Environment grant from the McGregor Foundation to the College of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Koops has designed a program to allow CWRU music education students to engage in a cross-cultural partnership with music education students at Shenyang Conservatory in Shenyang, China.

Dr. Koops' counterpart, Professor Chen from Shenyang Conservatory, visited CWRU in October 2008 to share information and plan. During his visit, he lectured on traditional folk music and music education in China, and toured local schools and attended classes at CWRU to become familiar with music education at CWRU and in the community. Professors Chen and Koops used this visit to exchange examples of curricula and to better define the scope of the collaboration they hoped to develop between the universities and among their students.

Upon his return to Shenyang Conservatory, Professor Chen recruited students to participate in collaborations with CWRU students enrolled in "World Music in Education" (MUED 305) during the Spring 2009 semester. The class is now underway and students are conducting interviews on the teaching and learning of music, sharing performance recordings, composing a song or piece together, designing a listening lesson based on Chinese pop music, and developing a unit on Chinese music to teach in a Cleveland-area elementary school.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Dr. Koops' work in the Gambia has practical implications for music education in a general elementary setting. The results of this study can contribute to culturally informed music education, and also have some lessons for music instruction in general. In-depth study of specific music making practices can be used to improve music education by bringing together theory, or an understanding of the context and meaning of music, and practice. It is essential that students understand something about the meaning and relevance of music to the people who created it in addition to gaining practical experiences of music making by engaging in song, dance, instrument use, and listening. Improving children's experience and uptake of music education will require additional research and adjustments in the teaching of music.

This research also provides insight into ways to address the disconnect between music inside and outside of the classroom. This disconnect hurts music education and leads to missed opportunities to encourage learning through participation and the use of music making that is relevant to children's lives. In addition, by observing the ways children exhibit agency in informal music making, educators can increase

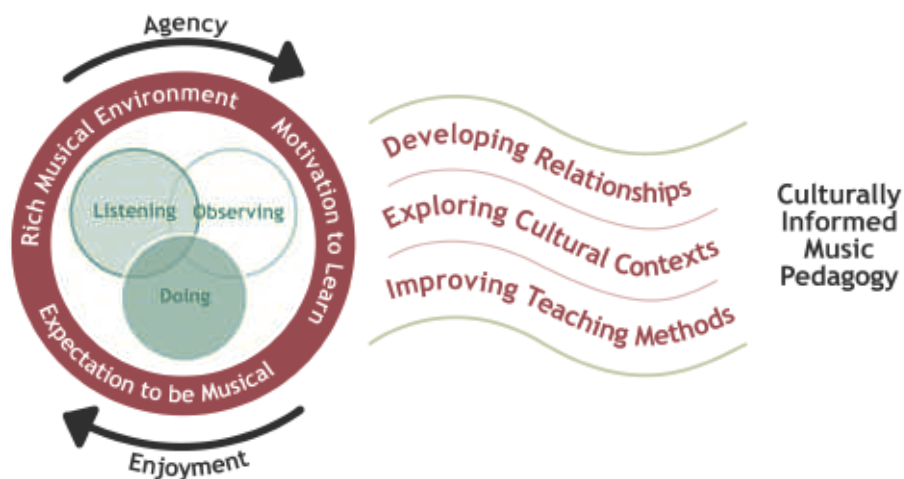


Figure 1

opportunities for children to practice leadership and decision-making in the formal educational setting. An additional insight from Dr. Koops' study was the presence of a musical environment, in which Gambian children were encouraged to be musical in all aspects of their lives. Teachers could adapt this element of Gambian musical culture to increase the presence of music in their teaching environments.

Dr. Koops has identified three teaching pathways to improve culturally informed music education based on the results of her ethnography (see figure 1):

- 1) Improving the methodology used in teaching music from practices other than one's own
- 2) Exploring the cultural context of music and the role of music in people's lives
- 3) Developing relationships between students, musical practices, and music makers

These three pathways together can increase teachers and students' knowledge and enjoyment of music from other cultures, thus enriching American music education.

ⁱ Le François, G. (2000). *Psychology for teaching* (10th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

ⁱⁱ Edidin, A. (1998). Playing Bach his way: Historical authenticity, personal authenticity, and the performance of classical music. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 32(4), 79-91.

ⁱⁱⁱ Edwards, K. L. (1998). Multicultural music instruction in the elementary school: What can be achieved? *Bulletin for the Council of Research in Music Education*, 138, 62-82.

^{iv} Pembroke, R. G. & Robinson, C. R. (1997). The effect of mode of instruction and instrument authenticity on children's attitudes, information recall, and performance skill for music from Ghana. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 133, 115-120.

^v Campbell, P. S. (1998). *Songs in their heads: Music and its meaning in children's lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.