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# Who's in the Room?: Using Research to Honor Student Individuality to Enrich Musical Learning

## Abstract

There has been an increase in recent scholarship on the topic of knowing and understanding students in the music classroom and honoring the identities of individual students (Culp & Davis, 2023; Robinson & Culp, 2021; Salvador & Culp, 2022). The purpose of this article is to provide research-based suggestions to support teachers in better knowing the students in their music classrooms by honoring and understanding students' cultural backgrounds, academic needs, and musical potential.

## Introduction

There has been a great deal of conversation in the field of music education in recent years about the importance of knowing as much as possible about the students in our music classrooms and honoring students' identities as people and music makers (Culp & Davis, 2023; Robinson & Culp, 2021; Salvador & Culp, 2022).

Instead of delivering instruction that is one-size-fits-all, music teachers are encouraged to adapt to the learners in the space. But what does it truly mean to know a student? As those responsible for helping to guide and deepen students' music-making and music engagement, teachers must consider the ways they can know their students as musicians, individuals, and learners. By understanding students' cultural backgrounds, academic needs, and musical aptitudes, teachers can create curriculum and implement instruction that is tailored to individual learners while also serving the needs of the whole class. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide research-based suggestions to support teachers in better knowing the students in their music classrooms as individuals and as musicians.

## Learning and honoring cultural background

Every student comes to the music classroom with knowledge, experiences, and identities, which include their cultural background. Here, we use culture to mean the dynamic sense of belonging that comes from the union of activities, thoughts, and beliefs (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Students' cultural backgrounds may include race, ethnicity, gender, and disability, among others.

Teachers can learn about students' cultures by asking about students' families and communities, constructing the classroom environment as a safe space, and allowing students to share their personal identities over time (Salvador & Culp, 2022). Teachers can also invite students to share their musical preferences and experiences with the classroom to better understand their musical interests.

Because all students deserve to have their entire selves honored in music classrooms, pedagogies that are inclusive and responsive to students' cultures can support meaningful music-making experiences for students (Lind & McKoy, 2016; Salvador & Culp, 2022).

Culturally responsive education (CRE) is an umbrella term used by Bond (2017) to encompass culture-based approaches to teaching, including *culturally responsive teaching* (Gay, 2010) and *culturally responsive pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Bond (2017) suggested that CRE promotes recognizing and valuing students' diversity, individuality, learning needs, and cultural contexts in the music classroom.

Teachers can take steps to culturally-inclusive music classrooms that support musical risks, identity expression, and student choice (Green, 2016; Kelly-McHale, 2019). One way teachers can honor students' cultural backgrounds is by including student music preferences in the classroom (Hess, 2019; Schmidt & Smith, 2017). Through student-preferred repertoire, teachers provide instruction that is relevant and meaningful to students' needs (Lind & McKoy, 2016; Shaw, 2016).

Repertoire can also include cultural music that is important to the local community (Abril, 2009; Fitzpatrick, 2022). Musical concepts, such as melody and harmony, can be explored through this repertoire. Students can then compose their own songs in a similar style individually or in groups. To do so, they can follow the stages of learning utilized by popular musicians, such as learning by ear, through informal learning (Green, 2016). Learning songs by rote is also utilized in many other styles of music, such as gospel, folk, and bluegrass.

Teachers can address students' learning needs by modifying activities for students' skill levels and the available instrumentation (Clauhs et al., 2021). By individualizing instruction to students' learning needs, teachers can make this preferred

repertoire accessible for every student (Gay, 2010). Through these approaches to student learning, teachers can improve student-teacher relationships, honor students' identities in their classrooms, and support students to more deeply engage with preferred music outside of the classroom.

### Learning and honoring academic needs

Understanding students' specific learning needs can help teachers tailor instruction to deepen children's learning in each music lesson. However, before determining what students need to access specific curricular content, educators should consider how their students learn most effectively and what supports they require to be successful in general.

Importantly, teachers should be aware of whether students receive special education and related services, which may be provisioned under an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or a 504 Plan. Understanding necessary supports, such as assistive technology, can further help teachers improve music instruction (McCord & Watts, 2010).

To learn about children's academic needs, teachers can create space for open and continuous dialogue with students and parents (Thornton & Culp, 2020), and collaborate closely with paraprofessionals (Majerus & Taylor, 2020; McCord & Watts, 2010). Teachers should also recognize that musical encounters are multisensory experiences and that multimodal instruction may enhance musical engagement in the classroom (Fortuna & Nijs, 2020; Kerchner, 2000). When necessary, assistive technology such as digital software and modified instruments should be provided to help children access the curriculum and reach personal musical goals (Thornton & Culp, 2020).

Strategies and approaches that accommodate students with specialized needs can benefit all learners in the classroom. For example, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach to curriculum design and delivery that recognizes human variation as the rule, rather than the exception (Hall et al., 2012).

Inspired by architectural models seeking to provide universal access to physical spaces (e.g., ramps, elevators), UDL is implemented with learner variability in mind. UDL requires educators to provide multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement throughout the learning process. UDL can foster student agency in the music classroom when educators plan for diversity, invite curricular flexibility, acknowledge musical preferences, and provide adequate assistive technology (Darrow, 2016).

When teaching musical form, for example, educators can recruit interest and sustain engagement by allowing their students to suggest which works they will discuss. To diversify representation, teachers can design lessons that involve listening to and analyzing compositions, interpreting and drawing diagrams, and creating and performing movements to represent different sections of a piece. To provide multiple means of action and expression, educators can guide students to compose, improvise, create artwork, or invent body percussion to demonstrate their knowledge.

### Learning and honoring music potential

Though debate exists around the definition of music aptitude and how it should be measured (Geake, 1996, 1999; Gordon, 1998; Karma, 1982, 2007), understanding a student's music potential can help teachers meet individual students' musical needs (Gordon, 2012).

As demonstrated in Table 1, music education researcher Edwin Gordon created several tests to help teachers gather information to better adapt instruction to students' individual music needs (1965, 1979, 1982, 1989a, 1989b).

In Gordon's (2012) conception, music aptitude stabilized for life by age 9. Before this age, aptitude could be influenced by the quality of a child's music environment and fluctuations may occur until music aptitude stabilizes (Gordon, 2012). Gordon's tests come with manuals that describe how to administer them, as well as percentile rank norms.

In addition to Gordon's suggestions in the manuals (1986a, 1989a, 1989b, 1995), researchers have provided additional ideas for teachers to consider if they choose to use these tests (Bacon, 2023; Bolton, 1995; Flohr, 1981; Gordon, 1980, 1986b; Lehman, 1985; Yee, 2021).

In line with Gordon's (1986a) recommendations, teachers may develop local norms for PMMA, IMMA, and AMMA to help interpret results in the context of their specific population. Because these materials ask students to respond via same-different discrimination, playing "same" and "different" games with younger learners (approximately ages 5-10) prior to testing may help ready students for the testing experience and increase reliability of the scores.

Finally, teachers should incorporate guidance included in the test manual, such as providing short breaks, allowing alternative seating for student comfort, pre-setting answer sheets, and adapting the speed of directions as needed.

These adaptations may be especially helpful for English Language Learners and students who receive special education and related services by providing additional processing time or individualized guidance. Ultimately, these adaptations could provide more valid and reliable insights into students' music potential.

Using music aptitude tests can provide benefits for teachers and students. First, music aptitude tests can help teachers identify and encourage music participation for students with high music aptitude. Second, they allow teachers to compare students' observed achievement to their music aptitude. Third, they allow teachers another means by which to gather information about learners to improve individualized instruction: students with low aptitude, high aptitude, and anything in-between can be appropriately supported and challenged.

For example, quiet or shy students with high music aptitudes may not demonstrate their true music aptitude during class, resulting in the teacher assuming they do possess low music potential. Ideally, by knowing each student's music aptitudes, a teacher may better design instruction to appropriately support and challenge all students.

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Table 1 - Examples of Gordon's Music Aptitude Tests for School Age Children (Preschool - 12th Grade)

Year	Title	Grade Levels	Sub-tests/Domains
1989	<i>Audie</i>	Preschool (ages 3-4)	Melody Rhythm
1979	<i>The Primary Measures of Music Audiation (PMMA)</i>	K-3	Tonal Rhythm
1982	<i>The Intermediate Measures of Music Audiation (IMMA)</i>	1-6	Tonal Rhythm
1965	<i>Musical Aptitude Profile (MAP)</i>	4-12	Melody Harmony Tempo Meter Phrasing Balance Style
1989	<i>The Advanced Measures of Music Audiation (AMMA)</i>	4-12 University Music and Non-music Majors	Melody Harmony Tempo Meter Phrasing Balance Style

## Conclusion

By developing a deep understanding of students' musical aptitudes, cultural backgrounds, and learning needs, music teachers can create welcoming and inclusive environments for all learners. These ways of understanding and honoring students may not necessarily require radical change from music educators. Rather, teachers can take gradual steps to make incremental progress in each way.

By using research to take small steps toward equity and inclusion in music classrooms, music educators can ensure welcoming spaces for all learners for many years to come.

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