

RESEARCH

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CULTURALLY SUSTAINING CURRICULUM FROM THE GROUND UP: AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

When music educators design curriculum from the ground up with students (Hess, 2015), they center students' cultural experiences and diverse backgrounds, opening meaningful classroom dialogue (Singleton, 2022). As scholars have called for diverse concert programming practices (Pope, 2019; Yoo, 2021), teachers have expressed needs for practical models and resources. This project, supported by an action research grant from the New York State School Music Association (NYSSMA®), contributes to the music education community by providing a model for teachers who want to engage in culturally responsive programming.

In 2023 the Talent Unlimited High School (TUHS) Orchestra and Sound Off String Quartet collaborated on a residency and gala concert to fundraise for justice and outreach.¹ Students selected, rehearsed, and performed repertoire they felt was representative of their community and worked with experts in the field, growing as musicians and citizens.

All participants engaged in dialogue about the music, composers, and purposes of the concert. The TUHS Orchestra Director, Megan Delatour, observed students' excitement as they planned the event, finalized repertoire, promoted it on social media, and participated in a culminating professional recording. That event inspired us, the authors, to examine this "ground up" curriculum building.

Spring 2024 brought a new collaboration with Sound Off String Quartet to normalize diverse narratives at the forefront of music-making and create a welcoming community for TUHS students. A cornerstone of the collaboration was selecting repertoire reflective of the TUHS community, where 87% of the 446 students identify as Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color (New York State Education Department, 2024). Students collaboratively chose works by a diverse range of curated composers, considering musical difficulty, message, and composers' lived experiences. We also commissioned *Dirge for Robert*, from Malachi Brown, a living Black composer, using funds from the NYSSMA® action research grant.



Figure 1. TUHS x Sound Off gala poster



Figure 2. TUHS gala concert program

¹ Sound Off: Music for Bail is a collective of musicians and activists interested in leveraging their music to better their communities and raise money for abolitionist groups (<https://musicforbail.com/>). In 2023, gala proceeds went toward cash bail initiatives.

We designed this project to discern how developing curriculum with students can support and sustain students' cultural identities and experiences of belongingness, autonomy, and competence. Research questions included: (1) Do students feel more engaged when they select the repertoire and participate as musicians and producers? (2) How does performing the work of a local living composer enhance the experience? (3) What are the perceived outcomes for students in co-constructing curriculum?

Literature and theoretical framework

Although culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogical practices have received greater attention in recent years, teachers need more accessible models (Bennington, 2021; Davis & Dean, 2025). The comparative musics model centers students' lived experiences and interests, while facilitating relational thinking about all musics within the classroom and may inspire rich curricular exploration (Hess, 2015). This model invites teachers and students to co-construct curriculum experiences and discuss repertoire within its sociocultural, political, and historical contexts (Hess, 2015).

Our project was built on four key anchors: (1) curriculum is most meaningful when it is formed in partnership with students; (2) everyone can utilize their music to better their community through *artistic citizenship* (Elliott et al., 2016); (3) curriculum should include *courageous conversations* about race, culture, justice, and identity (Singleton, 2022), and (4) participatory action research is a pathway to facilitate inquiry and awareness while enacting change in local spaces. As Ms. Delatour and her students prepared for the 2024 gala, they concluded that

“our art is a reflection of our society and the spaces we exist in, therefore, it also reflects all things cultural and social as they impact our community. We resolved to use art to celebrate our cultural backgrounds, but also to call out injustices within those same backgrounds.”² (Delatour, personal communication)

Method

This project allowed for exploration of an innovative approach to music education practice (Tsugawa & Voght, 2023). The gala was planned in partnership with 24 TUHS orchestra students and TUHS's Humans Ending Racial Oppression (HERO) team,³ with support from the TUHS administration. After Institutional Review Board approval, we collected multimedia and textual data, including artifacts, videos, social

media posts, field notes, survey responses, and personal reflections. Seventy-eight students performed in the gala, and study participants ($n = 30$) included 25 orchestra students who completed the survey, four student members of the HERO team who participated in video interviews, and Ms. Delatour who also provided personal reflections. We reviewed and coded data, which were refined over time, and overarching themes emerged (Saldaña, 2021).

Findings

Student participants were overwhelmingly positive about their gala experiences. Since students wrote the script, introduced the pieces, and facilitated a mid-concert discussion, student ownership was foregrounded. Afterward, one student affirmed that “the annual strings gala is absolutely one of the most exciting events in the school year” (survey response) and another stated that “being involved as both a performer and an equity member is truly fascinating” (survey response). Student participants valued the performance, the diverse repertoire, and the opportunity to uplift their community.

Since students knew composer Malachi Brown from a prior concert, they trusted him and were eager to interpret his music. The connection provided a safe space to consider difficult subject matter like death and loss.

The students did not fully understand Malachi's piece when they started. The harmonic language was unfamiliar and 16 measures of a sustained A seemed excessive. But Malachi explained that his piece honored a dear friend who passed away at age 16:

“This piece encapsulates ebbs and flows of feelings at the time of his passing, as well as honoring the legacy he left with us. The last 16 bars you will hear are 16 As representing his 16 years of life. And after those 16 bars are three bars of silence, representing the three days in between his passing and the funeral honoring his life.” (Malachi Brown, personal communication)

Once students understood the musical significance, it opened their hearts in a new way. They played it with tenderness at the concert.

TUHS students joyfully celebrated the gala at the post-concert reception. There was a sense of belonging as they congratulated one another, took blissful selfies and expressed gratitude for everyone's contributions. One student participant explained that “being able to create art and have fun while performing” (survey response) makes the gala her favorite event.

Student autonomy facilitated musical encounters

² Courageous conversations at the gala centered the need for more diverse voices in classical music.

³ Ms. Delatour serves as the Adult Ally. Eleven student members helped plan the gala, including representatives from instrumental, drama, vocal, musical theatre, and dance studios – every studio that participated.

Students honored the gala as a shared knowing and ritual (Small, 1998), which included planning their attire like they would for prom. They also recognized that they will “carry this experience with them,” as one student noted in a survey response, regardless of whether they continue with music as a profession.

Discussion

The TUHS gala was an example of what happens when a director co-creates curriculum with students. Ms. Delatour used the gala to guide her students to study and contextualize a range of repertoire. As they crafted a musical narrative, they sought to understand all music “relationally.”

The students listened to various selections to construct a program that ranged from Bach to The Rolling Stones. They were determined to perform their favorite piece well: Romero’s *Fuga con pajarillo*. As one student participant noted, “The gala prep gives us the practice we need and helps us develop skills swiftly ... improving time management by scheduling practices either by ourselves, or as a group” (written reflection).

Since the students selected the repertoire, they took time to strengthen technique and refine performances, including stylistic accents, left-hand mobility, and subdivision counting for complex syncopations. Student autonomy facilitated musical encounters as rich intersections of musicianship, artistry, and community.

The gala was built with a culturally-sustaining mindset and students wanted everyone to know that the concert represented their TUHS community. In the words of Jessa (a pseudonym), students were proud to share:

“In the process of uplifting ourselves and our communities, tonight we see a reflection of ourselves through our art. On the outside, you came to hear an orchestra concert but digging a little deeper you see it *is so much more*. This concert **represents our community, culturally and artistically.**”

Conclusion and takeaways

As the educator facilitating this research, Ms. Delatour reflected on key themes that inform her next steps: (1) the increased student buy-in based on how connected students were to the source material demonstrated that personal connection is sustaining; (2) students have the capacity to have difficult conversations about music through the lens of race, culture, and gender; (3) when students see themselves represented in the curriculum, it gives them vision for the future. These realizations encourage Ms. Delatour to continue with the gala and to continue building curriculum with the students “from the ground up.” When students construct their own learning through their expertise and ownership, they take that responsibility seriously and they build a deep reservoir of personal knowledge, self-confidence, and experience. ||

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