



# Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Elementary Music

By Franklin J. Willis

I still remember the moment my approach to teaching elementary music shifted. I taught a student, Leticia, who was often disengaged in class. She would sit in the back, barely participating, while her peers clapped, sang, and played instruments with enthusiasm. Despite my attempts to encourage her, she remained on the sidelines. I began to question my methods and assumptions. *Why wasn't my approach working for her?*

Then, I attended a professional development workshop on culturally relevant pedagogy. It opened my eyes to how the content I was delivering and the way I was delivering it wasn't connected to her world. Leticia's culture, her experiences, and her musical identity weren't reflected in our lessons. *So, I made a change.*

First, I conducted a brief survey with my students to find out more about their musical backgrounds, their favorite artists, and what they wanted to learn in music class. From that survey, I learned that Leticia had a brother who was a local hip-hop artist and that she had a deep love for spoken-word poetry. I started incorporating hip-hop rhythms, songs from her cultural background, and storytelling into our lessons. *The transformation in Leticia was immediate.* She began participating, even leading her peers in activities that resonated with her. This teaching approach illuminated the profound cultural and musical identities my students carry with them into my classroom prior to receiving formal instruction.

This experience changed my teaching philosophy. I realized that foundational skills in music education go beyond mastering scales and rhythms—they are about connecting with students on a deeper level by acknowledging and showing appreciation for their

cultural backgrounds. In this article, I'll explore how building these expanded foundational skills in elementary music can be enhanced by culturally relevant pedagogy and why this approach is so important.

## THE NEED FOR CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

As defined by Gloria Ladson-Billings, *culturally relevant pedagogy* is an approach that encourages teachers to set high academic expectations and make learning meaningful by connecting with each student's culture, and fostering social-political consciousness, to create a transformative education experience (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Many elementary music programs in the United States still rely heavily on Western European traditions, which, while valuable, often exclude the musical experiences of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This disconnect can result in students feeling alienated from the curriculum and disengaged from music class. When foundational music skills are taught without considering the cultural backgrounds of students, teachers miss an opportunity to make learning relevant and meaningful.

Like Leticia, when I was an elementary music student, I found it hard to connect with the music we were learning in school. Instead of sparking joy, it left me disengaged. I often ended up being excused from class by the music teacher or left to do busywork in the back of the classroom. When my parents attended a parent-teacher conference, they were surprised to learn I wasn't participating in music class at all. They were puzzled because music was such a big part of our family life.

Every morning, we woke to music blasting from the speakers, Motown tunes played in the background as we did our Saturday chores, and I went to choir rehearsal at church every Wednesday.

Looking back on that experience, I believe my disinterest was rooted in the teaching approach. My music teacher didn't incorporate culturally relevant teaching methods, and as a result, I didn't feel seen or appreciated for who I was and the culture I came from. This disconnect led me to lose interest in music and made me want to escape the classroom whenever I could.

Despite my childhood experience, years later when I began working as a music teacher, I found myself utilizing the same ineffective teaching methods that had been at the root of my own disinterest as a student. Following my experience teaching Leticia, I realized that honoring my students' lived musical experiences, elevating their voices, and listening to their feedback were essential elements to making my music classroom a place where all students can shine. *Fortunately, no matter how long we've been teaching, we can change our approach.*

**For students, learning music that reflects their cultural identities boosts self-esteem and fosters a sense of belonging. They become more engaged, more confident, and more willing to take risks in their learning.**

Music teachers can create an inclusive environment where all students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. For example, this might be achieved by incorporating genres like salsa or reggaeton into rhythm exercises or using songs in other languages to help students connect more deeply to the material.

Culturally relevant pedagogy also empowers students by validating their cultural identities. When students see their culture represented in the classroom, they are more likely to engage with the content, participate in lessons, and take ownership of their learning. Ladson-Billings states, "Culturally relevant teaching requires that students maintain some cultural integrity as well as academic excellence" (1995. P. 476).

### **BUILDING FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS**

In traditional elementary music programs, foundational skills often focus on basic rhythmic patterns, pitch recognition, and vocal techniques, primarily through folk songs, nursery rhymes, and classical music. However, foundational skills in music are not just about technical proficiency—they are about developing a deeper understanding of music as a means of communication and cultural expression.

Culturally relevant pedagogy provides a framework to build these skills in a way that resonates with students' lives. For example, when teaching rhythm, instead of relying solely on quarter notes and half notes from Western music, teachers can use rhythms from African drumming or hip-hop beatboxing to help students understand complex rhythmic patterns in a context they relate to. This not only teaches rhythmic literacy but also promotes a global understanding of music and its cultural significance.

Similarly, teaching pitch and melody can be enhanced by incorporating songs from diverse cultures. Many non-Western musical traditions use scales and modes

that differ from the major/minor system commonly taught in elementary music classes. By exposing students to these musical traditions, we can expand our students' musical horizons while still teaching skills such as pitch accuracy and melodic recognition.

For example, teaching the pentatonic scale often found in a variety of cultures' folk songs and introducing students to the call-and-response structures found in West African music allows them to experience different melodic structures while learning essential music theory concepts. These approaches help students understand that music is global with endless variations, all of which are valuable.

### **PRACTICAL STRATEGIES**

Transitioning to a culturally relevant teaching approach requires intentional planning and a willingness to shift away from purely traditional methods. Here are some practical strategies to consider:

*Incorporate a variety of musical genres:* Include music from diverse cultures and genres in your lessons, such as African drumming, Caribbean calypso, Indian ragas, or Latinx reggaeton. Use these genres to teach foundational skills like rhythm, melody, and harmony, while highlighting the cultural context of each musical style.

*Connect music to students' lives:* Find out what kind of music your students listen to at home and incorporate those elements into your lessons. If a student enjoys hip-hop, explore ways to teach rhythm and improvisation through rap. If another student loves gospel music, use call-and-response singing to teach vocal techniques.

*Use Instruments from a variety of cultures:* Introduce students to instruments from various cultures, such as djembes, steel drums, or sitars (if you don't have access to any, this is a good opportunity to ask if students' parents or other community members have instruments they could bring and demonstrate). Allow students to experience firsthand the sounds and techniques of these instruments, while learning about the cultures from which they originate. This not only builds technical skills but also deepens their appreciation for global music traditions.

*Create collaborative projects:* Encourage students to bring their own musical traditions into the classroom through collaborative projects. Have them work in small groups to create performances that combine elements of different cultural music styles. This fosters creativity, builds teamwork skills, and allows students to take ownership of their learning.

*Incorporate movement and dance:* Many cultures integrate music with movement, so include opportunities for students to experience these connections. Whether it's learning salsa steps while playing Latin rhythms or moving to the syncopated beats of Afro-Cuban music, integrating movement allows students to physically connect with the music they are learning.

*Build Relationships with families and communities:* To ensure your curriculum is truly culturally relevant, engage with your students' families and communities. Invite guest artists from local cultural communities to perform or lead workshops. This not only enriches the curriculum but also builds a bridge between the classroom and the community, showing students that their cultural experiences are valued.

**THE LONG-TERM BENEFITS**

When foundational music skills are taught through a culturally relevant lens, the impact extends far beyond the classroom. For students, learning music that reflects their cultural identities boosts self-esteem and fosters a sense of belonging. All students can become more connected to the world around them as they develop a deeper understanding of and respect for other cultures. Students become more engaged, more confident, and more willing to take risks in their learning. This increased engagement often leads to improved academic outcomes in other areas as well, as students develop skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and problem solving through music.

For teachers, adopting a culturally relevant approach encourages personal and professional growth. It requires them to reflect on their teaching practices, challenge assumptions, and continually learn about the cultures of their students. This process not only enriches the teacher-student relationship but also leads to more dynamic and engaging lessons. Moreover, teachers who embrace this pedagogy often report a renewed sense of purpose and fulfillment in their work as they see the profound impact their teaching has on their

students' lives (Ladson-Billings, 2017).


**A CALL TO ACTION**

The journey of becoming a culturally relevant teacher begins with you. Implementing the strategies I've offered is a great start, but they alone won't make you culturally relevant. Understanding our biases, preconceived notions, and blind spots is crucial for self-awareness, personal growth, and professional development. Once you make the conscious decision to do this inner work, that transformed teacher shows up and inevitably transforms the classroom.

As music educators, we have the unique privilege of helping students build foundational skills that will last a lifetime—skills that should extend beyond the technical aspects of music. We should empower students to connect with their cultural identities and the diverse world around them, just as we do.

I urge all music teachers to rethink how you approach foundational skills in elementary music. Let's move beyond a one-size-fits-all model and embrace a culturally relevant pedagogy that honors the

rich musical traditions our students bring into the classroom and that exist throughout the world. By doing so, we can foster not only a love of music but also a deeper understanding of its power to connect people across cultures.

The next Leticia in your classroom is waiting for that connection. Will you make the shift? 



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**REFERENCES**

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**For a Deeper Dive**

Watch *Save the Music's* webinar "Culturally Relevant SEL in Music Education." This session features Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings and Franklin J. Willis sharing their stories about the impact of culturally relevant teaching.

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