

## An Exploration of the Relationships Between Cultural Background and Music Preferences in a Diverse Orchestra Classroom

### Abstract

*The purpose of this research was to investigate the music performing and learning mode preferences of fourth- and fifth-grade elementary students who were enrolled in an elective orchestra class in a culturally diverse elementary school. We were interested in exploring whether students' self identified race or ethnicity influenced the songs that they preferred learning on their string instruments and whether they preferred learning "by ear" or by reading music notation. Thirteen fourth-grade and 14 fifth-grade students (N = 27) participated in the study. During a nine-week period, they studied one song each associated with the African American and Mexican American culture, and one song from the standard Western European classical repertoire for orchestra. There was an overall trend for students to prefer music from a culture other than their own. Participants were nearly evenly divided in their preference to learn the songs by reading notation or "by ear."*

### Keywords

culturally responsive teaching, rote learning, music reading, elementary school, string music education

One of the greatest challenges of being an effective music teacher is meeting the needs of every student enrolled in a given class. The public school student population is becoming increasingly diverse, which requires teachers to use a variety of instructional strategies in order to meet the needs of every student. A disparity sometimes exists between the cultural backgrounds of teachers and the cultural backgrounds of the students that they teach. This cultural incongruence between students and teachers often contributes to misunderstandings and miscommunication. Consequently, instruction may lack relevance for some

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students, resulting in their disengagement from the learning process (Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

To address this issue, there has been recent movement toward culturally responsive teaching in general education; however, only a few researchers have investigated this practice in music classrooms (Benham, 2003; Bergonzi, 2006; Butler, Lind, & McKoy, 2007; McKoy, Butler, & Lind, 2009; Robinson, 2006; Rohan, 2011). In an attempt to increase the effectiveness of instruction in one diverse orchestra classroom, we investigated the influence of students' race and ethnicity on their music and learning preferences relative to the songs that were performed in class.

According to Gay (2000), culturally responsive teaching uses the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. Culturally responsive teaching implies an ability to affirm and to use these multiple perceptions of reality and ways of knowing to form bridges to new learning and ideas. Further, culturally responsive teachers understand the backgrounds of the students that they teach and can build connections between school and home (Gay, 2000). Culturally responsive teaching has particular significance in music education because music is "a source of cultural identity for many groups and communities and is one of several expressive forms through which cultures of the world and micro-cultures in the United States may be known and understood" (McKoy, 2009, p. 142).

Evidence of effective instruction in music education is often measured by the extent to which teachers can provide meaningful learning experiences for students that will lead to improvements in their achievement of musical skills and knowledge. Music educators may employ a variety of teaching strategies that are relevant to students and allows them to draw on their culturally specific musical knowledge base (Butler, et al., 2007; McKoy, 2009). For example, some cultures use primarily aural modes of music transmission, while others utilize music notation as the primary means of transmission. If a musical genre associated with a student's cultural background is used, a consideration for using the traditional musical transmissions systems of the culture must be considered. As Campbell (1991) has stated:

*In some traditions, aural learning is the principal – and sometimes the only – way music is learned. . . Even where there is a system of music notation, as in much of the world's art music, aural learning may frequently still take precedence. (p. 103)*

Research suggests that music instruction provided by culturally knowledgeable and responsive teachers is a crucial component in improving student well-being, motivation, sense of belonging and achievement (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Campbell, 1991; Gay, 2000; Green, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Stalhammer, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

One component of culturally responsive teaching in music is the selection and use of repertoire that is culturally relevant. According to LeBlanc (1987), listener characteristics such as age, membership in a particular ethnic group, and musical training can influence music preferences. Understanding students' music preferences may increase the relevance of instruction for students, which in turn may increase students' meaningful engagement with music while fostering their desire for long-term study. Young children tend to value and mirror the opinions of family and educators, whereas adolescents will actively reject values espoused by adults in favor of those accepted by their peer group. Listeners' membership in a specific racial or ethnic group also may influence their preference decisions. Listeners may more readily identify with music and patronize performers associated with their own racial or ethnic group than with music or performers of other ethnic groups (LeBlanc, 1987).

In addition to music preferences, students may be more willing to commit to the long-term study of a musical instrument if they derive pleasure and positive self-esteem from their participation. Several studies (Cose-Giallella, 2010; Creech & Hallam, 2011; Darrow, Novak & Swedberg, 2009) have indicated that multiple dimensions of students' music performance experience, including self-concept, feelings, emotions, and social interactions impact students' attitudes and perceptions regarding performance study.

Music instruction occurs across a variety of educational settings and curricular programs, including instrumental performing ensembles. In comparing participation in band and orchestra ensembles, orchestra is sometimes looked upon as the stepchild of American music education (Smith, 1997a, 1997b). Additionally, orchestra frequently has been perceived as an elitist ensemble given its traditional focus on music of the Western European classical tradition and the expense involved in participation. Fortunately, the growth of String Projects across the U.S. has enabled students to participate in string programs who otherwise would not have access either due to limited financial capacity or absence of a string program in their school. Because string projects typically offer access to string instruments at a nominal fee, students from a variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds are able to participate if they are interested (National String Project Consortium, 2011). This circumstance makes orchestras a particularly apt educational environment in which to explore the purported benefits of culturally responsive instruction and to help understand how effective music learning for culturally diverse students can be fostered.

The primary purpose of this research was to investigate the music performing preferences of fourth- and fifth-grade elementary students who were enrolled in an elective orchestra class in a diverse elementary school. We were interested in exploring whether students' race or ethnicity influenced the songs that they preferred learning on their string instruments. A secondary purpose was to explore whether the students preferred learning by ear or by reading notation.

## Method

### *Peck Elementary String Program*

The Peck Elementary String Program is a collaborative effort between the Greensboro Symphony, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), and the Clara J. Peck Elementary School. The primary goal of the Peck Elementary String Program is to provide instrumental music instruction to underserved students who otherwise may not be exposed to a string instrument. The secondary goal is to provide an opportunity for music education majors from UNCG to experience a diverse teaching/learning environment. Peck Elementary School is a Title I school with a 96 percent free and reduced lunch population. Enrolled students are 66 percent African American, 6 percent Asian, 8 percent Caucasian, 15 percent Hispanic, 2.5 percent Multi-Racial, and 2.5 percent Native American. Peck Elementary School currently does not offer instrumental music education and has a limited general music program.

The string program was an elective class and included third-, fourth- and fifth-grade students. The third-grade class met twice a week for 30 minutes and the fourth- and fifth-grade met three times a week; the fourth-grade meetings were 30 minutes in length and fifth-grade meetings were 45 minutes in length. All instruction and practice occurred during the school day, as students were not permitted to take the instruments home for security reasons. A graduate string education student from UNCG provided the instruction. Five additional university students (three undergraduate music education majors and two graduate performance majors) volunteered to help deliver instruction during this investigation and provided assistance to the lead graduate instructor.

### *Recruitment of Participants*

Approval from the university Institutional Review Board as well as from the county school system was secured prior to the start of data collection. A letter was sent to parents of fourth- and fifth-grade students enrolled in the orchestra program ( $N = 30$ ) that invited students to participate in the study. If Spanish was the primary language spoken in a student's home, the student was provided with a letter that had been translated into Spanish to take home. Twenty-seven of the students' parents gave informed consent for their children to participate in the study. Prior to the interviews, students were provided with an assent form and had the opportunity to provide assent or decline being interviewed. All 27 students agreed to be interviewed. Students who did not have permission to participate in the study continued in the program and participated in all portions of the class, but no survey data were collected from these students nor were they interviewed.

### Participants

Participants included the 27 children ( $n = 18$  females,  $n = 9$  males) for whom we had obtained parental consent. Thirteen of the participants were in the fourth-grade and 14 were in the fifth-grade. The students were asked to self-identify their racial/ethnic background using the categories outlined in the U.S. census. The demographic make-up of the class included African-American ( $n = 5$ ), White ( $n = 5$ ), Hispanic/Latino ( $n = 5$ ), multiracial ( $n = 6$ ), Asian students ( $n = 5$ ; 2 Vietnamese, 2 Cambodian, and 1 Thai/Vietnamese), and African ( $n = 1$ ; Senegalese) student. Languages spoken at home included: English ( $n = 11$ ), Spanish ( $n = 2$ ), Vietnamese ( $n = 1$ ), Wolof ( $n = 1$ ), English/Spanish ( $n = 6$ ), English/Cambodian ( $n = 2$ ), English/Cambodian/Vietnamese ( $n = 1$ ), English/Korean ( $n = 1$ ), English/Mu'ò'ng ( $n = 1$ ), and English/German ( $n = 1$ ). This demographic information was collected at the end of the study, following all instruction.

### Material and Lessons

Based on the school's overall demographic make-up, we selected three songs for the class that would have relevance to some of the students' backgrounds. The majority of students enrolled at Peck Elementary are African American or Hispanic/Latino. Therefore, we attempted to find a song that originated from one of the African American musical traditions, one from a Latino musical tradition, and included one song from the Western classical tradition for comparison purposes. Previous research investigating student music preference has suggested that tempo impacts preference (LeBlanc, 1981; LeBlanc & McCrary, 1983; LeBlanc, Colman, McCrary, Sherrill, & Malin, 1988; Montgomery, 1996). We attempted to control for tempo by selecting songs with a targeted performance tempo that ranged between 120 and 140 bpm. Using these criteria, we chose to arrange *This Little Light of Mine*, *Cielito Lindo*, and *William Tell Overture* (Figure 1) for use in this study.



Violin Excerpt: *Cielito Lindo*



Violin Excerpt: *This Little Light of Mine*



Violin Excerpt: *William Tell*

**Figure 1.** Violin excerpts of the melodies from each arrangement.

An instructional unit was designed to teach the students the foundations of string playing, aural skills, and music reading using the three songs selected for this study. The entire unit lasted nine weeks and included 27 lessons. *Cielito Lindo* and *This Little Light of Mine* were taught by ear in the tradition of the music of those two cultures; *William Tell* was taught by reading music notation. Prior to this investigation, the lab school curriculum regularly included learning by both ear and music reading activities. Rote activities were used to introduce basic instrument set-up as well as teaching simple songs by ear, while music-reading activities were presented without the instruments through the use of movement activities, rhythm/pitch flash cards, and singing activities. Over the course of the semester, these skills were combined so that students were familiar with learning by ear and reading music.

The three songs were introduced to the students on the first day of the unit by one of the researchers and were subsequently taught on a rotated basis so that each song received the same amount of instructional time. The three graduate students taught the elementary students in small groups on the third class of each week. Instructional groups were rotated so that any teacher bias in regard to song preference or preference for teaching by ear versus music reading was balanced. Information relating to the cultural context of the music was deliberately not presented so that students would not be unduly influenced in regard to their preference and cultural background. The undergraduate university volunteers, under the direction of one of the researchers, provided a private lesson to each student on the song of their choice in a corresponding classroom.

### *Procedure*

This study utilized a mixed method research design that included both quantitative and qualitative data. For purposes of cross-verification, we triangulated our data using three dependent measures to investigate the students' song preference: written responses to a survey, oral responses provided during individual interviews, and documentation of song selection during private lessons times. A survey was administered to the students following the completion of the nine-week unit and their final concert performance. The survey allowed students to self-identify their racial/ethnic background, and to rate their music preference in relation to how much they "liked learning and playing" each

song presented during the unit. The survey was designed using a four-point rating scale that allowed each student to rate his or her preference for each song learned in class. Students were instructed to circle the number that corresponded to how much they “liked learning and playing” each song. Anchors included: 1 – Do Not Like!, 2 – Not Very Much, 3 – Liked It, 4 – Liked a Lot! Students were also asked to indicate whether they enjoyed being in orchestra class, whether they planned to enroll in orchestra during the subsequent year, and if they preferred learning the songs by ear or by reading music notation.

### *Private Lessons*

When determining the song or instrument preference of children, observed behavior may be a more effective method than self-report (Geringer, 1977). Therefore, university interns provided a 10-minute private lesson to each student during which the students were permitted to select the song of their choice from among the three songs. At the beginning of the private lesson, which occurred in a corresponding classroom, students were asked to select the song that they would like to practice. They were reminded that we were learning *This Little Light of Mine*, *Cielito Lindo*, and *William Tell Overture*. Once students selected a song, they were asked why they chose that particular song, and the university volunteers recorded that information for later analysis.

### *Interviews*

After the final performance, students were interviewed individually by one of the researchers with whom they were familiar to promote a relationship of trust and increase their comfort level during the interview (Punch, 2002). Students were given the option to pass on a question or end the interview at any time. Questions at the beginning of the interview were included to put students at ease and encourage them to share details about themselves. In instances when students showed an interest in sharing more information, follow-up questions were asked. The following questions were included in the data analysis:

1. What is the primary language spoken in your home?
2. How do you feel about playing in orchestra class?
3. What do you enjoy most about orchestra class?
4. What was your favorite piece that you learned for this concert?
5. Why was it your favorite piece?
6. Had you ever heard any of this music before you learned it in orchestra?
7. If you heard it before, where did you hear it?

## **Results**

### *Preference*

Students rated their preferences in regard to learning and playing the pieces on the survey as follows: *Cielito Lindo*,  $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = .75$ ; *This Little Light of*

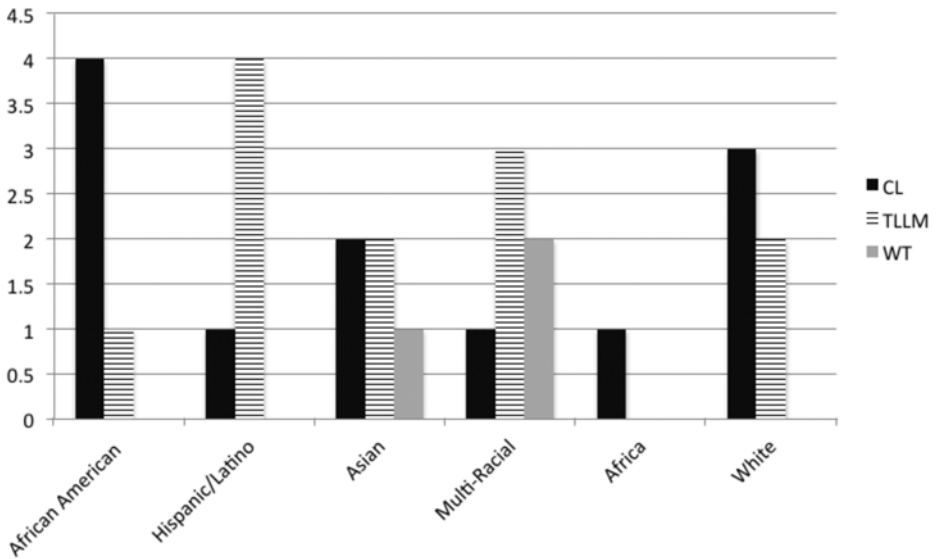
*Mine*,  $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = .64$ ; *William Tell Overture*,  $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .85$ . Mean preference ratings for all three songs were higher than the rating corresponding to “Liked It.” Seven of the 27 students rated all three songs as “Liked a Lot!” Survey responses to the question regarding whether orchestra was enjoyable included 25 “yes” responses and two “no” responses. Fourteen of the students indicated that they preferred to learn music by ear and 13 indicated that they preferred reading music.

The individual student interviews were transcribed and students’ responses to the question regarding their favorite song were recorded and compared to the survey ratings and private lesson choice. Agreement indices comparing students’ song preference responses from the survey, the individual interviews, and the private lesson episodes revealed that 12 students’ responses were consistent across all three measures (44%). Between stated song preference and survey ratings, 24 of the 27 students’ responses were in agreement for these two measures (88%).

When asked to name their favorite song during the interviews, 12 students named *This Little Light of Mine*, 12 students named *Cielito Lindo*, and three students named *William Tell*. During the private lessons, eight students selected *This Little Light of Mine*, eight students selected *Cielito Lindo*, and 11 students selected *William Tell*.

A comparison of students’ race/ethnicity and stated song preference during the interview revealed some trends regarding race/ethnicity and song preference for a song from another culture (see Figure 2). Four of the five African American students selected *Cielito Lindo* as their favorite song, and four of the five Hispanic/Latino students selected *This Little Light of Mine* as their favorite song. Of the five white students, two selected *This Little Light of Mine*, and three selected *Cielito Lindo*. Of the five Asian students, two selected, *This Little Light of Mine*, two selected *Cielito Lindo*, and one selected, *William Tell*. Three multi-racial students selected *This Little Light of Mine*, two selected *William Tell*, and one selected *Cielito Lindo*. The student from Senegal chose *Cielito Lindo* as her favorite. Overall, students whose cultural backgrounds corresponded with the cultures of the songs chosen for the study tended to select songs from a culture other than their own as their favorite song to learn and perform (see Figure 2).





**Figure 2.** Graph of student stated song preference by racial/ethnic background.

Responses during the individual interviews provided additional information that clarified the individual student's song preference. Several of the students had personal relationships with the music learned in class that related to home or family, which is one characteristic of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000). One of the fourth-grade African American students selected *This Little Light of Mine* as her favorite song. Transcripts from her interview are included below. Permission was granted by the child's mother for us to include her name (Soleil), which is pertinent information when interpreting the child's relationship with her preferred song.

*Interviewer - "Well, what did you enjoy most about orchestra class this year?"*

*Participant - "Ummmm, learning This Little Light of Mine."*

*I - Why was it your favorite piece; why did you like it?*

*P - Because when I was a baby, my mom used to sing me that song.*

*I - Oh! Isn't that nice, so you heard it before?*

*P - Yes.*

*I - Yeah and your Mom used to sing it to you.*

*P - Cuz my name (Soleil) is French for the sun.*

A fifth-grade female shared that her favorite song was *This Little Light of Mine* because "now I can play it with my papa in church." Another student

said that he preferred *William Tell*, “Because I’ve heard it since I was a kid - I liked it - I didn’t even hear the whole song - now I get to hear the whole song!” The same student noted that he had heard both *William Tell* and *Cielito Lindo* previously. He was familiar with *William Tell* from watching *Tom and Jerry* (an animated children’s program) and had heard *Cielito Lindo* during a trip to visit his family in Honduras. One student, who identified herself as Mexican, chose *Cielito Lindo* as her favorite piece. When asked why it was her favorite, she responded, “Because when I was in third grade, I used to hear it in the car. It used to come on and sing [sic].” She reported that she enjoyed orchestra “Because I like playing in front of people, and I like my Mom and Dad watching me play.” She also shared that her parents came to her final concert to watch the performance.

Additional responses from the students related to feelings of success. Two students preferred *Cielito Lindo* because, “It was easier.” One preferred *This Little Light of Mine*, “Because I know it.” A feeling of accomplishment seemed to impact some of the students’ song preferences. “It was kind of challenging, but not too hard, and we could add stuff to it and do things with it,” replied a fifth-grade student who was recalling the addition of advanced parts to the *William Tell* arrangement. A fourth-grade student, whose father was from the Dominican Republic, chose *Cielito Lindo* as his favorite song during both his private lesson and his interview. During the private lesson, he explained that he chose *Cielito Lindo* because “I have hardship with it.” In his final interview, he again chose *Cielito Lindo* and his reason was that “I couldn’t really play it that much and I guess I just worked it up to get it really good. So it was kind of a challenge maybe.”

Five of the students identified rhythm, tempo, or beat as the reason they chose a specific song as their favorite. A fourth-grade boy indicated a preference for *William Tell*, “Because I like more notes.” Additionally, two students said they preferred the song they chose because they were permitted to sing it. Additional comments did not appear to fall into a specific category, but were included in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Mean Tuning Grade by Instrument and Distance*

Cultural Background	Favorite Song	Reason
African American	TLLoM	Because when I was a baby my mom used to sing that song to me. Because my name is French for the sun.
African American	CL	I just like it
African American	CL	Because I like how it go back to the G string and D string
African American	CL	Because of the beat

African American	CL	I don't know
African/Senegal	CL	It's a very slow song
Asian/Cambodia	CL	I like the tune of it
Asian/Cambodia	TLLoM	Because it's like a pattern in the song except in the ending
Asian/Vietnam	CL	It was easier
Asian/Vietnam/Thailand	WT	It was kind of challenging, but not too hard, and we could add stuff to it and do things with it.
Hispanic/Latino	TLLoM	Because I know it
Hispanic	TLLoM	Because I like singing it
Hispanic/Latino	TLLoM	Because I like how the beat was
Mexican	CL	When I was in 3rd grade, I used to hear it in the car
Multi-racial/Asian/AA	TLLoM	I thought it was fun to learn and play
White	TLLoM	Because we sang it (and she likes singing)
White	TLLoM	Because now I can play it with my Papa in church
White	CL	I enjoyed learning it; playing and doing all those different kind of notes
Asian/Vietnam	TLLoM	I have a book about it
Hispanic/Latino	TLLoM	Learned the rhythm of this piece before learning the others
Multi-racial	WT	Because I like more notes
Multi-racial	TLLoM	Because I liked the singing part
Multi-racial	TLLoM	Because it had a good rhythm to it
Multi-racial/Indian/Asian	CL	Because it was easier
Multi-racial/AA	WT	Heard it since I was a kid and liked it
White	CL	I liked the tempo of it
White/Irish/Dom Rep	CL	I couldn't really play it that much and I guess I just worked it up to get it really good. So it was kind of a challenge maybe.

TLLoM - *This Little Light of Mine*

CL - *Cielito Lindo*

WT - *William Tell*

### *How do you feel about being in orchestra?*

Twenty-five of the 27 students reported that they “liked” being in orchestra, or that orchestra made them feel “good,” “great,” “happy,” or “calm.” Two students reported mixed emotions about being in orchestra. These responses were consistent with the anonymous survey results in which 25 students reported “yes” that they enjoyed orchestra and two students reported “no.” A fourth-grade male indicated that he was not sure how he felt about being in orchestra. The researcher asked follow-up questions that revealed the student frequently felt

hungry and had to wait until after orchestra to eat his lunch. The other fourth-grade students who were not enrolled in orchestra ate lunch before “specials” (music, art and physical education), while the orchestra students ate lunch following specials (orchestra) due to a schedule conflict. He also expressed an interest in attending the other specials with his peers.

*Interviewer - OK, so why do you think some days you wish you didn't have to go to orchestra?*

*Participant - Because number one, I be hungry and sometimes just my arms and stuff and I really want to go to specials.*

*I - So do you have to wait and eat lunch after orchestra?*

*P - (nods)*

The fifth-grade female, who did not always enjoy orchestra, responded as follows:

*I - How do you feel about playing in orchestra now that you've been in orchestra for a year?*

*P - Sometimes I wanna come to orchestra and sometimes I don't feel like leaving my class, leaving my friends cuz they're like "B. no, don't go, don't go."*

*I - Oh, really!*

*P - and I say, "I have to go, I have no other choice."*

*I - Yeah. Cuz you joined orchestra. So what class are you leaving to come to orchestra?*

*P - Recess.*

Prior to this interview, neither researcher was aware that the fifth-grade students had elected to miss recess three times a week in order to attend orchestra. Students were not permitted to miss orchestra classes without dropping out of orchestra, which explains why the student felt she had “no other choice.”

### *Open Ended Responses from the Survey*

Students were asked whether they preferred to learn music by ear or by reading notation. No correlation between culture and preference for a learning mode was found. Fourteen of the students reported a preference for learning by ear and 13 indicated a preference for learning with notation. Students were asked why they felt this way. Responses were grouped by topic and four discreet categories emerged. Many students preferred one learning mode over the other because it felt “easier” or the other mode was “too hard,” which implied that feeling successful impacted their enjoyment when learning a song. Other students preferred having notation because they experienced difficulty “remembering” or they felt that one method was “more fun.” Some of the students who expressed a preference for learning by ear thought that they were more successful learning this way. In response to why she preferred learning by ear, a fourth-grade student

remarked, "Because you can learn how the notes sound." Another fourth-grade student noted, "It helps me to learn and remember." A fifth-grader responded, "I like to learn by ear because you can memorize it a little better and learn it faster [sic]."

A number of students indicated that reading music was "too hard." A fourth-grade student said, "[I prefer learning by ear] because I can't read music that well because I might read a note wrong and it wouldn't make sense in the song." Three other fourth-grade students expressed the opinion that "reading music is hard." Or "reading music is a little hard" and "I have a hard time with the music staff."

Other students shared that learning by ear was ". . . sort of funner [sic] and everything and you learn better. I think that." Another student agreed, "Because it is fun to learn by ear." The remaining comments did not fall into one of the preceding categories. One student noted, "I would rather learn by ear because it is challenging and fun, whereas Reading [sic] music is boring & easy."

Eight of the 14 students who indicated a preference for reading music made comments related to ease or success. Individual students remarked, "Because it is easier to read music." "Because it is easier [sic] than learning by ear." A fifth-grade violinist indicated, "I would rather read music because it's easier, and I can see the notes and memorize it faster."

Four of the students felt that it was better to learn while reading music because they were able to "remember" the song, or they expressed difficulty in "remembering" the songs. A student wrote, "I would rather read music because it's hard to remember school information for Science, Reading, and Math and orchestra music [sic]." Another student noted, "If you forget some notes to the song you can look on the paper and play what's on it." Still another commented, "Reading music is easier and I can remember it [sic]." Finally, I prefer reading music "because I forget the songs."

## Discussion

The purpose of this research was to investigate the music performing and learning mode preferences of fourth- and fifth-grade elementary students who were enrolled in an elective orchestra class in a diverse elementary school. We were interested in exploring whether students' race or ethnicity influenced the songs that they preferred learning on their string instruments and whether they preferred learning by ear or by reading notation.

Among students whose race/ethnicity was associated with the culture of one of the three songs chosen for study, there was an overall trend for students to prefer music from a culture other than their own. The majority of African American students selected *Cielito Lindo* as their favorite song to learn and play, while the majority of the Latino students selected *This Little Light of Mine*. These participants' general preference for music not associated with their own culture could be due to the novelty of that music. Caution should be taken when

considering this result; it is a small sample, we did not provide a song from a culture associated with every race or ethnicity represented within the class, nor did we provide cultural background information about the songs during the unit. Additional music from other cultures or additional contextual information during the presentation of the songs may have changed the students' response to the songs and provided a different outcome. As Campbell (1998) indicated:

*Since children are influenced by their own personal and cultural worlds, they typically will examine information they receive from their teachers, match it to their needs and interests, and discard the parts they do not find relevant.*  
(p. 180)

Additionally, Schippers (2010) noted that “not all context is relevant” and asks, “. . . does it really help students understand Javanese gamelan if they know that Indonesia consist of 16,400 islands” (p. 57)? For this particular investigation, our aim was to allow the students to establish their music preferences unencumbered by instructor-disseminated information relating to the cultural context of the music. The interview responses revealed that some of the children identified their own culturally-specific contexts in which the music they preferred took on special meaning. Though the effect of cultural context on music learning was beyond the scope of this particular study, further research in this area would be valuable.

The preference ratings from the students were high for all three songs. It seemed that the students enjoyed learning and playing all of the songs in the unit. When we compared the three dependent measures: student ratings, private lesson choice, and stated song preference, 12 students were consistent among the three measures. When we compared the students' stated song preference to their highest rated song, 24 of the 27 students were consistent. During the private lessons, students did not necessarily select their favorite song to practice. In fact, 14 of the students selected a song other than their stated favorite to practice during the private lesson. When the students were asked why they had chosen a particular song to practice during the private lessons, seven of the students responded that they needed help with that particular song. It seemed that the desire to succeed encouraged many students to use the private lesson time to improve their performance on the song that they felt needed the most practice. It is also possible that some students selected songs that needed improvement because they were at school and perhaps thought this might be what was expected. If students had been able to take their instruments home and play a song on their own or had been asked what they would like to play in a less structured non-school environment, their choices might have been different.

Students were asked whether they preferred to learn music by ear or by reading notation. Fourteen of the students reported a preference for learning

by ear and 13 indicated a preference for learning with notation. Many of the students reported preference for one learning mode over the other because they felt more successful learning by ear or more successful learning by reading notation. Four themes emerged from the students' written responses and included the following: it was "easier" or "too hard," learning felt "more fun," or it was easier to "remember" the music using one mode compared to the other. Interestingly, students' reasons for preferring one learning mode compared to the other were similar regardless of which mode he or she preferred. In other words, the majority of student responses related to personal feelings of accomplishment or success.

We found no relationship between race/ethnicity and preference for a learning mode. However, there was a trend related to grade level and preference for learning mode. While 62 percent of fourth-grade students preferred learning by ear, only 36 percent of fifth-graders preferred learning music in that way. Conversely, 38 percent of fourth-grade students preferred learning by reading notation, compared to 64 percent of fifth-graders. It is possible that more fourth graders chose learning by ear because they had not been playing as long as the fifth graders and were less able to focus on both the executive skills and reading skills simultaneously. The fourth-grade may have compensated by preferring to use their aural skills.

Success was a consistent theme throughout this study. Frequently students preferred music or a particular learning style because they felt more successful. During both interviews and private lessons, students cited reasons for liking or disliking songs based on their personal success performing that song. One of the fifth graders reported during her interview that she did "not like!" *This Little Light of Mine* because it made her sound "scratchy when I am trying to cross the strings." Another student reasoned that he preferred *Cielito Lindo* because, "I couldn't really play it that much, and I guess I just worked it up to get it really good. So it was kind of a challenge maybe."

Additional reasons that students preferred certain songs included: relationships to family and home (Gay, 2000), the tempo, rhythm or beat (LeBlanc, et al., 1988; Montgomery, 1996), or other reasons that did not fall into a specific category. Some students described a strong cultural connection to one of the songs because they had experienced it at home or in church. It is also possible that students connected to more than one of the songs in the unit, but the questions we asked focused the students' attention on their favorite song.

One of the most important aspects of this study was learning more about the students who were enrolled in the orchestra class. Neither the researchers, nor the graduate student who regularly taught the class, were aware of how many different cultures were represented in the class. We also were not aware that the fifth-grade students were missing recess to take orchestra and the fourth-grade students were eating lunch after their non-orchestra peers. None of the fourth-

grade or fifth-grade students elected to drop orchestra to attend recess or an earlier lunch period. This observed behavior may be a stronger indication that the students enjoyed orchestra and valued the experience than the interview or survey responses.

### *Conclusions*

The results of this study reinforce the importance of learning about individual students prior to designing effective and relevant instruction. Many of the students in this study had very personal and individual responses to the music learned in class; some of their responses were intimately related to culture and others were not. Understanding the relationship between a student's cultural background and music preference is a complex issue that warrants careful attention. For example, in this study there was a trend for students to prefer learning to play songs from a culture other than their own. This information illustrates the fact that teachers should not make automatic assumptions about the extent to which individual students may prefer music associated with their race, ethnicity, or culture. Furthermore, the race or ethnicity with which a student self-identifies may be comprised of a variety of cultural groups wherein each group has a different genre of music associated with it. Students who self-identify with the same racial or ethnic group or group of national origin may not share the same musical culture, and thus, their intra-group musical preferences may be decidedly different. Teachers may consider exploring what music students like and how they engage with music outside of school. This information may then be used to inform plans for school musical experiences.

A common connector for all of the students in this study was the desire to succeed. Students frequently reported preference for the learning mode or individual song that made them feel personally successful; similarly, students expressed dislike for the learning mode or individual song that made them feel less successful. Regardless of cultural background, students are motivated by success and thrive when given goals that they can achieve; an important reminder to teachers when designing instruction. Given that the students were nearly evenly divided in their preference for learning by ear or learning through reading notation, it seems logical for teachers to include both modes of instruction with frequency so that all students are able to experience success. This study has a number of limitations including a small sample size and the representation of music from only three cultural music traditions (Western European classical, African American spiritual, and Mexican Ranchera). Furthermore, we focused primarily on music selection, learning by ear, and learning with notation. Culturally responsive teaching embodies a much broader set of skills and includes numerous characteristics that were not included in our study. Nevertheless, little research has investigated the impact of culturally responsive teaching in music; this study sought to fill that void. Additional



research that focuses on individual students and the process of culturally responsive teaching would benefit the music education profession.

### Authors' Note

For purposes of this article, we have used the following definitions for race, ethnicity, and culture as approved by the American Psychological Association Council of Representatives (2002, pp. 8-9):

**Race:** the category to which others assign individuals on the basis of physical characteristics, such as skin color or hair type, and the generalizations and stereotypes made as a result.

**Ethnicity:** the acceptance of the group mores and practices of one's culture of origin and the concomitant sense of belonging.

**Culture:** the belief systems and value orientations that influence customs, norms, practices, and social institutions, including psychological processes and organizations.

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