

Music and Social Studies

The combination of music and social studies is a natural connection because so much of what is known and understood about culture comes through music and the arts. Studying music can help people to understand what the culture values, what makes it unique, and what expressive forms and symbols are important in the culture. In addition, music can help students understand the people of a culture through their artistic endeavors.



The study of culture helps us understand ourselves

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Multicultural music is a key component of the elementary music education program. Because the contemporary classroom reflects the multi-ethnicity of the United States, the elementary curriculum should represent the culture and arts of diverse peoples.

A focus on multicultural music is not limited solely to the study of the music and culture of various groups of peoples but also includes music of people of different religions, social classes, ages, and many other areas. The multi-ethnic classroom in contemporary elementary education suggests that students bring their own cultural heritages to the educational process. The more appropriate term for the study of music from diverse ethnic groups is multi-ethnic; however, multicultural music education is the phrase most often used in the United States.



A focus on multicultural music is more than the study of cultures

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The concept of world music education is related to multicultural music and is a relatively new approach to North American classrooms. Proponents of world music education promote the study of the musical elements as

manifested in the music of various cultures of the world. Rhythmic elements can be taught using songs from Poland or dances from Thailand so that musical components can be contrasted and compared from one culture to another. This implies a more broad-based approach by placing emphasis on the music and its styles and compositional elements rather than the cultural and contextual environment of the art form.

The perceptive and sensitive teacher is aware of the culture of the students and takes this into consideration when designing the curriculum by adapting and using the literature, instructional modes, and interests of the students as part of the lesson activities. This also involves the teacher learning the special linguistic, social, and religious needs of the students so that these issues can be handled with sensitivity and care.

Many teachers may feel hesitant about teaching music from a culture other than their own. This is understandable, and educators may draw back from teaching songs that are not in the mainstream of Western art music. However, it is important to consider the opportunity students will have by experiencing the diverse ethnic communities of the United States. Students can be guided to learn about the values and traditions of the world's people through the music classroom.

Music and Social Studies (Continued)

Throughout the class, there are model experiences that focus on African American, Navajo Indian, Mexican American, Chinese New Year, and Jewish Hanukkah topics. During these lessons, students explore music elements and examine the arts of the particular culture:

- How are the arts expressed in that culture?
- How are they used and valued?
- What are the roles of individuals and groups?
- How has that culture contributed to and blended with American culture?

Lessons can also explore the lifestyles, celebrations, and history of various cultures.



Multicultural lessons can focus on many aspects of the arts

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Lessons for the elementary classroom that integrate music activities with the social sciences might include some of the following ideas:

- The students can create a mnemonic chant for geographical facts (cities, states, state capitols) and use percussion instruments to keep a steady beat as an accompaniment for the chant.
- In a unit focused on a culture, students can collect songs from the culture and compile a notebook of lyrics, music, and recordings. Dances of the culture can be included in the class activities. Students can study the music of the culture and analyze how the songs are historical records of how people felt, thought, and acted.

- In a unit focused on a culture, students can study the musical instruments of the culture and compare them to the musical instruments of the western European world. Students can also discuss how music creates values in society.



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- Most world cultures have instruments of similar construction
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- Students can create a Venn diagram (two overlapping circles) to compare music from two cultures. They can use music elements to list likenesses and differences.



Unfamiliar languages may make educators hesitant to teach other musics

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Music experiences can begin with lessons and activities in which the teacher feels competent and adept. Listening, movement and/or dance, and performance on authentic instruments (or replicas) can all be implemented using the music of other cultures. Resources in the form of recordings, music arrangements, and supplemental materials abound through publishers and the Internet, and many of the more traditional basal series textbooks also include songs, activities, and suggested readings to enhance the students' experience.

While the elementary teacher faces growing curriculum demands, the effective teacher will introduce new musical experiences gradually into the

curriculum. A complete redesign of the curriculum is not necessary and may not be the most successful approach.

Educators can also enlist other resource and classroom teachers to collaborate on the design and implementation of units from different countries, regions, or ethnic groups. In this way, students can take part in a more intensive experience by studying, performing, and recreating history, current events, literature, crafts, artwork, dances, and music.

Teaching Multicultural Music

Most of the world's music is transmitted orally and received aurally. The teacher should strive to help students understand the process of music learning through this traditional process of music instruction.



Oral transmission of culture is common in many populations

Developing a multicultural understanding and teaching multicultural music involves familiar teaching practices and procedures that are integral to any well-planned lesson including

- Modeling
- Imitation
- Exploration
- Improvisation

Modeling

In modeling the song or dance, the elementary teacher needs to strive for the most authentic performance possible. Vocal sounds, word pronunciations, and selection of instruments all need to be as authentic and close to the original as possible. Selecting the clearest and dependable sources and recordings to use as guidelines will help to stop cultural stereotyping and eliminate offending practices.

Artists from ethnic-cultural communities can be invited to perform, speak about, or assist in teaching their work. In general, students are very receptive to guests in the classroom and will be willing to participate in a positive manner.

Most state arts councils have published rosters of artists available for public presentations, and community leaders are usually knowledgeable about community members who are active in the performance of their art form. Many artists have experience with school-aged students and are willing to discuss authentic performance practices and help bring students to an understanding of the cultural traditions they are studying.

Listening provides an important modeling resource. Recordings are one of the most authentic means of enabling students to hear or see the performed music. After learning a song, dance, or activity, students can compare their performance with that on a recording to gauge their performance level.

Imitation, Exploration, and Improvisation

After modeling, students should be encouraged to imitate the teacher's performance. The imitation can be enhanced by having students explore and improvise on specific types of performance practices found in the music — for example, a vocal trill, or rhythmic grouping. Through this process, students become more acquainted with the intricacies of the music, building confidence in their own performance abilities.

Teaching Approaches for Multicultural Music

Within the scope of a school year, there are limitless possibilities for teaching students musical concepts and skills along with the musical traditions of the world. Students can learn about the musical elements, sing, listen, and dance to the music of Mexico or Mali. Through all these experiences, students can be guided to an understanding of the musical and cultural components of many musical traditions.



A variety of music traditions are available

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Experiences in multicultural music need to be more extended than a one or two-day lesson plan. A more in-depth, intensive approach will necessitate the inclusion of a variety of experiences over the span of several weeks, a month, or longer.

This approach needs substantial time for the elementary teacher to review and select materials such as instruments, recordings, maps, posters, photographs, and literature (poetry, stories, folktales). The teacher must place the music within the cultural context in which it was created.



Comparisons of music and culture among different societies are an effective teaching approach.

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The teacher may select related art forms from the same culture for inclusion in a unit of study. Dance, opera, painting, sculpture, poetry, architecture can all enhance the learning experience. These supplemental elements will often have parallels in processes of construction and meaning in addition to providing a richer picture of the total cultural environment.

The elementary teacher should consult state published curriculum guides for themes and country-specific topics relating to history and social studies at specific grade levels.

Literacy in multilingual and multicultural contexts

Effective Approaches to Adult Learning and Education



Resources can assist with imitation and exploration

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The context of the music is important in the planning of a multicultural lesson. Many sacred and ceremonial pieces are designated to be performed for select occasions, at designated times of the day, or by specific persons. Some sacred and ceremonial pieces might not be appropriate for performance by students in a classroom context. It is important for the educator to be knowledgeable of the traditions, values, and customs of the music selected to guide students to an understanding of the music. Information about the music's function and meaning will help to bring about thoughtful discussions and lead students to acceptance of and more perceptive insight into the music. If there is a question about the appropriateness of the music, another piece should be chosen.