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**Get Them and Keep Them: Recruitment and Retention Strategies of Underrepresented
Students in Instrumental Music Programs**

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Abstract

Underrepresented students often face more hardships than their peers during the enrollment and continuation of an instrumental music program. In the context of this paper, underrepresented students will include economically disadvantaged students, minority students, and students of color. In the areas of cultural issues as they relate to pedagogy, school setting and financial resources, and communication and language, literature exists to justify the need for continued research to increase the participation of underrepresented students in school instrumental music ensembles. The literature available emphasizes the need for educators to focus on being intentional with recruitment and retention strategies to increase diversity in school instrumental music programs.

Literature Review

As the student population in America becomes more diverse, it is important to research and address the low enrollment and retention of underrepresented students within school instrumental music programs. It has been found that “...minorities, students of lower SES, English language learners, and students whose parents/guardians earned a high school diploma or less are underrepresented in music ensemble electives” (Kinney, 2019, p. 24, para. 1). Davis (2021) supports the importance of this research by explaining that “the majority of the population of the United States will be made up of racial minority groups or reach “majority-minority” status. Therefore, the recruitment and retention of black and Latinx students will be key to the survival of ensemble music programs” (Davis, 2021, para. 2). This growth of minority students, students of color, and economically disadvantaged students in schools is not commonly represented in music programs, as “Students who choose to initially enroll in music are more likely to be White, female, and from higher socioeconomic backgrounds” (Tucker & Winsler, 2023, para. 8).

Cultural Issues and Pedagogy

Representation

Student Diversity

Research shows that Black students are less likely to enroll in school orchestras. In fact, “Alegrado and Winsler (2020) showed that there were no ethnic differences for initial band or choir enrollment, but there were for guitar and orchestra (Black students being less likely to enroll in both, Asian students being more likely to enroll in orchestra)” (Alegrado & Winsler, 2020, as cited in Tucker & Winsler, 2023, para. 9). It is important that students of color that are interested and join school music groups do not feel isolated within their ensemble due to being

the only one of their ethnicity. Interviewee Patricia Ann Neely supports this feeling when she recounts her experience attending the Viola da Gamba Society of America Conclave. She states that “When I started attending, there was one other African American there, and I knew that I was going to be able to feel comfortable in this environment” (Bull et al., 2023, para. 5).

Hale (2024) found an unbalanced ethnic makeup not only in string enrollment, but in all performing groups. In that study, it was found that “An overwhelming majority of White students choose to enroll in performing music, while over half of Black students and almost half of Hispanic students remain in the entry-level “general music” course for the duration of their public school years” (Hale, 2024, p. 80, para. 1), indicating an ethnic gap in all performing ensembles, not only orchestra.

Faculty Diversity

Diversity of faculty within a music program may be equally as important as diversity of students. According to Davis (2021), “The race or ethnicity of string teachers may also influence the decision for minority students to participate in orchestra programs” (Davis, 2021, para. 5). If students of color have never seen a music teacher of their own race, they may not consider the possibility of that career for themselves, which may impact their decision to participate. DeLorenzo (2012) shares that one of their “African American students at the university confided that she never thought about music teaching as a career because until high school, she had never experienced any music teachers of color” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 24). Along with music faculty, “Teachers, arts supervisors, and teacher educators also need to recognize that recruitment of black and Latino preservice teachers for the public schools is critical in providing role models for students and music teachers who work with students of color” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 42).

The literature highlights the positive impact that faculty diversity and representation can have on students of color in a music program.

Professional Musician Diversity

Exposing students to professional musicians of color can also show and inspire students of color to participate in a music program. DeLorenzo (2012) states that “Although one might find a very different level of representation in jazz or ethnic ensembles, black and Latino musicians are seriously underrepresented in many professional orchestras in the United States” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 3). However, the article goes on to explain that “Teachers can make sure that students have experiences with black and Latino classical performers via media, such as YouTube; invited guests to the music class; or recordings, such as CDs, that feature artists of color” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 32). Providing opportunities for students of color to see and hear musicians who look like them can inspire them to continue with the music program, and create more representation of musicians of color in professional ensembles.

Composer Diversity

The literature addresses the importance of exposing students to composers of color, especially students of color. Orzolek (2021) received feedback from their students regarding the implementation of music composed by people of color. What they found is that “they appreciated studying this music and desire additional opportunities to perform more music by diverse composers” (Orzolek, 2021, p. 43). While this feedback was from all students in the ensemble, it adds to the representation of people of color in music for students of color who are commonly exposed to mostly music of white composers. One student mentioned, “I have been playing music for a majority of my life but never by people that look like me or have similar stories to mine” (Orzolek, 2021, p. 44), emphasizing the significance this representation has for students of

color. The researcher goes on to say that “Many of the students saw these pieces as a chance to learn more about other cultures and other peoples and as a chance to look into the lives and experiences of people different than themselves” (Orzolek, 2021, p. 43). DeLorenzo (2012) states that “White teachers are often surprised to learn that students of color might associate a musical career with skin color” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 24), and this statement is just as relevant in the world of orchestral composing. Exposing students of color to composers who look like them can remove this barrier, and inspire students to continue with music to further experience the field.

Cultural Responsiveness

Cultural Awareness

White music educators must be mindful that students of color are facing emotions that they have not experienced. Bull et al. (2023) supports this by saying “There’s a lot of hurt, and there’s a lot of anger within my own ethnic group because we’re talking about hundreds of years of discrimination toward African-Americans” (Bull et al., 2023, para. 8). By being culturally aware of our students of color, teachers can create a more conducive environment to learning and fostering passions. To become more culturally aware, Davis (2021) suggests that “As a professional community, we should ask how we are using culturally responsive teaching and relationship building to help recruit and retain historically marginalized Black and Latinx students in our orchestra programs” (Davis, 2021, para. 6). DeLorenzo (2012) supports this suggestion by stating that, pertaining to the the specialized needs of black and Latino students, “these needs may seem more pressing in the urban setting, there are many students of color in our suburban schools who also benefit from culturally responsive teaching and special encouragement to advance their musical studies” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 28). To begin

implementing cultural awareness, DeLorenzo (2012) states that teachers can “take time to get to know their students and create an inviting place for making music”, as this is “likely to appeal to students of color who may be reluctant to participate in ensembles” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 29). To better prepare teachers for becoming culturally aware and responsive, especially in an urban setting that may serve a majority of students of color, DeLorenzo (2012) cautions against “avoiding conversations about race or the special skills that one needs to teach in an urban school”, as this “allows preservice teachers to persist in seeing teaching through their own cultural lens” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 38). The literature strongly supports cultural awareness of music educators to better serve their students of color. However, additional research is still needed to better understand the implications in the field of instrumental music education.

Student Voices

Literature supports the effectiveness of hearing the perspectives and needs of students to better implement cultural responsiveness. It is important to understand that students may need different modes of sharing their opinions. Orzolek (2021) supports this by stating “While some are very willing to share their viewpoints in class, others prefer to write out their comments or share their thinking in dialogue through online applications” (Orzolek, 2021, p. 43). One collected response by a student of color in this study shared that “As one of the people of color in the band, it is a struggle to be in a place where you do not see many people like you. I felt very safe in band, and I owe that to the openness of our class, even when we went online. I am grateful for a place to express how we feel” (Orzolek, 2021, p. 44). This statement supports the importance of creating a culturally responsive environment where students of color feel safe, valued and heard. By listening to the opinions and experiences of students of color in ensembles, we can have “A better understanding of who is most likely to leave music during the transition to

high school” which “will allow for a focused, data-driven approach to addressing the student persistence problem for educators, administrators, and policymakers” (Tucker & Winsler, 2023, para. 2). The student feedback collected by Orzolek (2021) shows that if music educators become culturally responsive, they can create a positive atmosphere for students of color to feel welcome and successful.

School Setting and Financial Resources

Continuity of Instruction

In schools that may serve many economically disadvantaged students, minority students, and students of color, such as urban schools, extra challenges may exist that impact the continuity of instruction for string students. DeLorenzo (2012) supports these challenges with the statement that “Not knowing whether the district can continue, for instance, the string program or provide necessary resources to build a comprehensive music program, reflects the constant uncertainty that urban music teachers face” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 10). The literature addresses the continuity barriers faced by urban teachers that “Classes might be cancelled or rescheduled without warning, teachers may need to take over for another colleague who is absent, or parents might keep a student home to babysit a sibling when child care falls through” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 14). All of these factors may lead to students not being prepared for a concert performance. The importance of this issue is highlighted in the literature, as “Since a concert is often the way that administrators and parents measure the value of the music program, inconsistent rehearsal patterns place the music teacher in an unfair situation that is not of their making” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 14). These inconsistencies, and the poor concert performances that may come about as a result, can discourage the students in these situations from continuing with the program.

Since the literature includes findings that this is a common barrier in urban schools, many underrepresented students may be impacted.

Auditions

Auditions are commonly used to place students in specific ensembles, chair rankings or to assess talent for admission. Due to biases and lack of resources, students of color may face hardships in auditions that privileged white students may not face. The literature by Bull et al. (2023) and DeLorenzo (2012) supports these challenges. In order to better represent and create opportunities for students of color in ensembles, Bull et al. (2023) supports auditions for certain ensembles. The interviewee specifically states that they would like to see “screened auditions as is customary with classical orchestras”, as "You don't know who you're listening to, but you are listening to what the candidate has to offer musically" (Bull et al., 2023, para. 8). Bull et al. (2023) goes on to suggest that “If there is no plan to make the playing field equal, then our attempt to address the lack of diversity becomes a study in quotas” (Bull et al., 2023, para. 8). While screened auditions can remove the barrier of biases towards white students, students of color who come from schools or homes that are economically disadvantaged still may not experience as much success as economically privileged white students. DeLorenzo (2012) explains the impact of these challenges by stating, “Without continuity in music instruction, money for private lessons, or instrument rental and other resources, students can hardly develop a competitive level of performance skills that lead to participation in music camps, community orchestras, or college music programs” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 18). While any economically disadvantaged student may experience these challenges in an auditioned setting, students of color who often make up a majority of economically disadvantaged areas may experience these hardships more often.

Economic Barriers

DeLorenzo (2012) explains economic barriers that may impact the experiences and opportunities of economically disadvantaged students in instrumental music. “Middle- and upper-class parents can afford private lessons and the fees associated with extracurricular music activities” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 16). For students with parents, guardians or caregivers who cannot afford these resources, the quality of music education will not be as great as those from wealthier homes. Along with this economic barrier, those who work more than one job may find difficulties in transporting their children to musical opportunities outside of the school day, which is common at the high school level. For example, “Families in which caregivers work two or more jobs or rely primarily on bus transportation may find it difficult if not impossible to follow through with the expectations of a regional ensemble” (DeLorenzo, 2012, para. 35). Based on this literature, students at the secondary level who may be facing economic struggles may not receive the same quality of musical opportunities and engagement as those who can afford these resources.

Communication and Language

English Language Learners

A factor that may impact the inclusion of English Language Learner (ELL) students in instrumental lessons, in some cases encompassing a large number of students of color, is the extra pull-out instruction within their school day. Instrumental music programs tend to rely on pull-out lessons during the school day for instruction. “Lorah (2014) finds systemic barriers for English language learners in regards to the required remedial coursework embedded in their schedule and the lack of parental advocacy to make changes to this practice” (Lorah, 2014, as cited in Hale, 2024, p. 18, para. 2). If the schedules of ELL students are not accommodated for,

they may not be able to participate fully or at all in an instrumental program, potentially impacting the overall number of underrepresented students in the program.

Effective Communication

Instrumental music programs rely heavily on parent participation. These responsibilities include securing an instrument and supplies, encouraging and supporting their child's at-home practicing, and transporting their child to ensemble rehearsals and concerts. However, many parents face barriers that prevent them from receiving forms of communication that do not align with the schedules of their personal lives. For example, "It is reported that especially working parents do not have enough time to cooperate with school" (Ozmen et al, 2016, p. 31, para. 3). Also, with the rise of technology, "...teachers shouldn't think that all parents have access to such technology, and so, they should investigate whether they can benefit from the new technology" (Ozmen et al., 2016, p. 31, para. 4). If a music educator is only providing communication via technology, a parent with limited to no access to technology may not know how to sign their child up for instrumental lessons, or who to contact for this information. Lastly, to effectively communicate information to families who speak little to no English, "Teachers should observe their own speech and make sure that they omit educational jargon from written communications" (Ozmen et al., 2016, p. 31, para. 5), including communication that is to be translated.

Findings and Solutions

Cultural Issues and Pedagogy

Solutions and areas in need of continued research exist within the literature involving the recruitment and retention of underrepresented students in instrumental music. Music educators can increase the representation of students of color in their ensembles through cultural responsiveness in their recruitment strategies. In their study of hip-hop music instruction, Hall &

Martin (2013) found that “Students cared about the subject matter because it directly related to their cultural and social experiences” (Hall & Martin, 2013, p. 102, para. 8). Music educators can use elements of the student body’s cultural and social experiences through the songs they demonstrate on each instrument to capture the interest of young students during recruitment. Further exploration in this topic can increase correlations between these findings and formal research, as the research and current studies in this area are limited.

School Setting and Financial Resources

Music educators and school administrators can create more equitable school settings and resources for students to reach the entire student body, ultimately creating ensembles reflective of the overall student demographics. Due to higher minority and economically disadvantaged student populations, “music programs in urban schools are particularly at risk of failing to attract students to music elective offerings and being more likely to populate these offerings with students who differ from the general demographic composition of the school” (Kinney, 2019, pp. 25-26). Through strategies such as instrument donation drives, programs can obtain district-owned instruments for families in financial need to rent at little to no cost, eliminating financial barriers.

Zaretsky (2024) explains how the New Haven Public Schools in Connecticut eliminated financial barriers for students who wish to play an instrument. Families who cannot pay for an instrument can sign a contract to receive a school-owned instrument. “Some schools get donated instruments that are repaired and loaned to students” (Zaretsky, 2024, para. 6), which adds to the number and variety of instruments available for students. While literature exists to justify the barriers that underrepresented students face, especially those who are economically disadvantaged, the field can benefit from additional research offering solutions to these

obstacles. The practice of providing free and reduced-cost instruments has been implemented in many schools and anecdotally accepted as an effective way to boost enrollment, but the long term effectiveness regarding retention has not been proven.

Communication and Language

Music educators can strive to create equitable learning environments for ELL students and equitable communication strategies with families of all backgrounds. From a pedagogical lens, music educators already use “Curwen hand signs when teaching solfege and conducting gestures to evoke expressive singing or playing” (Abril, 2003, p. 42, para. 3), but pairing hand signs with verbal cues can also strengthen an ELL’s understanding of vocabulary (Abril, 2003). Being intentional with the hand signs that we use can foster an equitable instructional environment for ELL students in the instrumental classroom and ensemble setting. To connect with and further understand ELL students in their learning, Eliyahu-Levi et al. (2023) recommends that educators “develop emotional self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and inter-cultural competence” as “teaching practices and interactions with children occur in a cultural context and are not neutral or incidental” (Eliyahu-Levi et al., 2023, p. 552, para. 3). This can be accomplished through learning about the cultures within the school, learning directly from students about their traditions and routines at home, and professional development in these areas. Through proper cultural training in these areas, teachers can “act as cultural mediators, incorporate experiences from the children’s cultural world, and to connect new knowledge learned in class to the children’s home and community” (Eliyahu-Levi et al., 2023, p. 564, para. 4) to heighten the personal connection and quality of learning with their ELL students.

In response to working parents who may have limited time to interact with the school, Ozmen et al. (2016) recommends that educators send out a survey at the beginning of the school

year to learn the best times parents can be reached, and in turn offer the most effective times to speak with parents. Music educators specifically can use these times to send out communication such as lesson schedules and concert information. Ozmen et al. (2016) also recommends using a variety of communication, both technology and face-to-face or written, to accommodate all families, especially those without access to technology.

Conclusion

Literature supports the need for further research on the enrollment and retention of underrepresented students in instrumental music programs. Research is already available to illustrate the hardships and challenges that underrepresented students face in the motivation and logistics of participating in instrumental ensembles. Professionals in the field can expand this understanding and knowledge by studying the specific needs of underrepresented students in instrumental ensembles, and work towards finding solutions to these areas of need to equitably serve all students.

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