

Creciendo en Confianza:

Nourishing Inclusivity and Belonging for English Language
Learners in the Music Classroom

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As a cuatro instructor with Chicago's Puerto Rican Arts Alliance, I was charged with providing after-school instrument instruction to twelve elementary school students, all of whom were Hispanic and several of whom were English Language Learners (ELL.) The mission of the organization is to celebrate Puerto Rican tradition and culture primarily through music and arts programming for youth. I signed-up to teach the cuatro, the national instrument of Puerto Rico, with little knowledge of the instrument itself, much less the cultural significance it carried.

On the first day of cuatro lessons, I posed an icebreaker question to the group in both English and Spanish: "Why do you want to learn how to play the cuatro?" As a young and rather inexperienced educator, I meant for the question to be a routine introduction so we could quickly dive right into the music. The responses, however, were quite revealing.

"I've spent most of my life in Puerto Rico," one student mentioned. "And I want to go back to tell my grandma that I'm learning the cuatro."

"The cuatro was my grandparents' favorite instrument," another young musician told the group. "They both died recently and I know they always wanted me to learn how to play."

"I wanted to learn how to play a Puerto Rican instrument," a third student added.

For most of my students, the cuatro was an inextricable link to their Puerto Rican identity and background. They expressed a clear interest in the cuatro because it was so directly relevant to their lives, families, and backgrounds. (If I posed this same icebreaker question about the cuatro to a group of white students in rural Nebraska, for example, I would almost certainly not receive responses that were as personal and culturally relevant.) The cuatro carried a certain level of cultural pride that palpably primed and motivated their engagement with the musical content throughout the term. Our final performance further facilitated a level of cultural celebration

within the greater Hispanic and Puerto Rican communities. The semester culminated in a riveting onstage musical display in which the young ensemble performed three songs for a 200-person audience, most of whom were immediately familiar with the cuatro and its impact on Latin music. In this way, the final concert was a demonstration of the students' musical growth, but it also proved to be a moving celebration of Latinx music and culture as a whole.

While this opening anecdote presents an optimistic example and vision of what culturally responsive pedagogy might look like to support young Hispanic musicians, the vast majority of Hispanic students in the United States do not have access to entire organizations like the Puerto Rican Arts Alliance to advocate on their behalf in the music classroom. In fact, Hispanic students, and ELLs in particular, are left largely to fend for themselves on a number of levels in the American public school system. The 2001 White House Strategy Session on Improving Hispanic Student Achievement suggests that Hispanic students drop out of school four times more often than white students and twice as often as black students. Similarly, one out of five Hispanic ELL students don't receive any form of individualized support despite the language barrier that inevitably disrupts their learning. In addition, the Hispanic population in the United States continues to grow. A more updated study, the 2017 White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, confirms that "Hispanics are the fastest growing minority group, and will represent 60% of our nation's population growth between 2005 and 2050." The study proceeds, "Hispanics have the lowest education attainment levels of any group in the United States." On the surface, this data demonstrates a clear disconnect between Latinx culture and traditional American schooling, but more specifically, these statistics reveal the damaging social and curricular isolation that is thrust upon many Latinx students in American schools.

In this essay, I want to pose the question, “In what ways can the music classroom provide more opportunities for English Language Learners to see themselves and their cultures in the music curriculum?” With that query in mind, I want to contextualize the significant lack of Hispanic representation on a literal and curricular level in American music classrooms. Similarly, I will emphasize the remarkable educational disparities that have historically faced (and continue to face) our young Hispanic and ELL musicians as well as the urgency with which educators and policy makers should work to resolve them. Finally, I will offer a few ideas for how to cultivate a robust sense of belonging for Hispanic and ELL students in the music classroom

The described academic “failures” of young Latinx students must be observed through a critical and historical lens. It’s important to recount the history of discrimination that has faced Latinx communities in the form of racial segregation since the late 1800’s (Lind and McKoy, 2016). Initially, “Mexican schools” aimed to serve the children of Spanish-speaking migrants that found work across the rural southwest in the 1870’s, and by the 1940’s, many families moved into cities in search of other work (Blakemore, 2017). By that point, 85% of Mexican children, most of whom were ELLs, attended separate, physically dilapidated schools that placed them in English-speaking classes with no resources to support their cultural and linguistic assimilation (Lind and McKoy, 2016). As a result, many students were forced to repeat grades multiple times, and they were blamed for their underachievement in the classroom. In other words, Latinx students in the 1940’s and 1950’s were effectively pushed out of the American classroom. This should sound familiar. There isn’t much change or growth to speak of in this regard according to the aforementioned 2001 White House study conducted nearly 60 years after urban “Mexican schools” were introduced. Regina Carlow, a music educator whose research

focuses primarily on her work with ELLs, describes that “one subpopulation of ELL students that is at great risk for failure is immigrant teams that arrive in U.S. urban school systems with significant gaps in their previous schooling” (Carlow, 2006.) Carlow’s observation reminds us that the consequences of historical discrimination towards ELLs are relevant and long-lasting. Continued racial segregation in schools coupled with a systemic failure to academically support and engage Hispanic and ELL students illuminates the limited scope of *Brown v. Board of Education* and leaves much to be desired for educational equity.

In the same vein, it’s essential to acknowledge the disproportionate challenges and obstacles that still negatively impact historically marginalized groups. In their book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching in Music Education*, Vicki Lind and Constance McKoy compare the terms “achievement gap” and “opportunity gap.” They argue that the term “achievement gap” (a term commonly used to describe educational disparities by race and class) unfairly evaluates individual students instead of the systems that constantly fail them. They write, “unfortunately, there is a tendency for us to blame students for the disconnect, assuming their lack of engagement is their fault,” when in reality, there exists a significant disconnect between a student and their learning, and students are not being met where they’re at (Lund & McKoy, 2016.) The term “opportunity gap,” on the other hand, accounts for the unequal playing field and *acknowledges* disparities among racial, cultural, and class lines. This is the intersectional lens through which we must approach any sustainable solution.

A solid start might be to offer significantly more resources in the music classroom for students for whom English is a second language. Approximately 1 out of every 10 public school students are ELLs, and for most, Spanish is their first language (Neel, 2017.) Unfortunately, our

musical pedagogy has not adapted to these changing demographics. ELLs frequently aren't placed in arts and music electives due to increased accountability around test scores. As a result, ELLs end up in classes that are more aligned with the test. (Lind & McKoy, 2016.) When ELLs *do* take music classes, most music teachers are not sufficiently trained to work with non-English speakers (Abril, 2003.) Abril writes, "This lack of knowledge often leads to uncertainty and confusion. This in turn can lead to ineffective music pedagogy for these children. While teachers have the best of intentions, they often teach in their usual ways and fail to adapt to children with special needs... The language barrier and its social ramifications may be factors that ultimately place some Hispanic students at risk" (April, 2003.) Language is certainly a tool to exchange words and meaning, but it is also the verbal transmittance of culture and social norms. Abril notes, "A child's first experiences in school--positive or negative--can have a profound and lasting effect... When a new ELL arrives in the music classroom, immediately involve the child in meaningful activities that will make him or her feel welcome in the class" (Abril, 40.) This level severe cultural and linguistic conflict can be difficult to reverse if not treated delicately early on.

Apart from a dearth of resources available to ELLs in the music classroom, the lack of culturally responsive teaching is also a clear deterrent for Hispanic students to participate in music. In their 2011 study, *High School Music Ensemble Students in the United States*, Kenneth Elpus and Carlos Abril found that white students and students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were highly overrepresented in music classrooms. ELLs, on the other hand, were half as likely to participate in music ensembles than other students. There was also a close correlation between students that participated in music programs and students with advanced

postsecondary degrees (Elpus & Abril, 2011). This research is particularly thought-provoking because of the obvious fact that white students of higher socioeconomic status with well-educated parents are not the only group that enjoys listening to, learning about, and creating music! Elpus and Abril's study certainly begs the question, "who is American music education for?" and more specifically, "what is preventing underrepresented groups from accessing music education?"

It's fair to assert that Hispanic students do not feel seen or included in the urban music curriculum. In turn, this depletes self-worth and fosters a destructive sense of disbelonging. It's important for educators to alter their teaching practices to intentionally and structurally include students from the non-dominant culture. Steven Alvarez, a community educator whose research primarily explores bilingual education and community literacy, has adopted a practice called "confianza," which is also the Spanish word for "trust" or "confidence." Borrowed from Monzó and Rueda (2003), the practice of confianza "provides children with contexts for learning that are dynamic and build around multifaceted relationships." Alvarez openly acknowledges the lack of trust that often exists between white teachers and non-white students, particularly as students grow older and become more and more aware of the systemic injustices in their lives and communities. Specifically, he notes that "[F]rom the Mexican community, overcoming distrust can prove difficult because of issues of citizenship and proven marginalization of Latin American immigrants historically in the United States... these crises reinforce inequalities by fracturing and dispossessing the voices of the communities, and thereby the dignities of communities" (Alvarez, 2018.) Confianza, in other words, is a tool that leverages relationships

with students to celebrate and lift student voice as a means to explicitly combat structural injustice. In Alvarez's words:

Community literacy researchers must take on a responsive stance when engaging public writing projects that explore the resiliences of minoritized communities, challenging inequalities with writing and using language to both bold critiques and also to compose expressive projects that reflect translocational struggles and histories, as well as emerging presents and futures. A responsive orientation to literacy practices and translanguaging repertoires of students extends the asset-based pedagogies research that honors, explores, and extends communities. Creative genres invite the translanguaging practices of communities involves being open to reflection, discussion, and making socializing with members using all resources available across languages to students' communities can develop and mentor critical and creative community projects that respond to language, identity, and local issues of social justice.

(Alvarez, 2018)

Alvarez is suggesting that when students are able to see and hear themselves in their schools and in their curriculums, more meaningful relationships are likely to bloom. With that in mind, recognizing and lifting student voice should be integral to any music instruction.

Oftentimes, this entails rethinking what we might consider a "traditional" music curriculum, including its evaluation system.

The Clark County School District's (CCSD) comprehensive Mariachi Education Program in Arizona is a fantastic example of a culturally and linguistically relevant music curriculum.. Richard Carranza, a mariachi teacher at Pueblo Magnet High School, developed a mariachi program that produced a 90% high school graduation rate (Neel, 2017). When reflecting on his work, Carranza wrote, "If you capture their interest, their intellect, commitment, and minds will follow (Neel, 2017.) Clearly, the cultural identity of his students are at the center of his teaching. Mariachi educators from the CCSD program have found that "students demonstrate a high rate of school attendance because they simply do not want to miss out on the enjoyment of making music each day." Relatedly, most mariachi instructors require a specific GPA in order for

students to participate which has boosted academic gains for participating mariachi students (Neel, 2017.) Mariachi programs are particularly useful for ELLs since all of the teachers are bilingual in English and Spanish. As such, ELLs experience significantly less cultural and social isolation in a mariachi classroom. Similarly, many ELLs grow up hearing many of these songs in early childhood, and the melodies “become ingrained as aural representations of home” (Neel, 2017.) Other educators reported an increased parent involvement in fundraising efforts as well as concert attendance (many parents were familiar with many of the mariachi numbers that groups performed.) In that same way that the Puerto Rican Arts Alliance effectively and academically coalesced culture, community, and music, the CCSD mariachi program found similar results.

Ramon Rivera, another Mariachi educator in Wenatchee, WA, experienced parallel success with his mariachi program. He writes:

In the programs that I teach, the dropout rate has gone down for our Latino students, and I believe it is because they have found a connection to school. They feel a lot of cultural pride, self-esteem, school pride, and that sense of family... Where we teach mariachi, at Wenatchee High School, most of our students are from migrant families that work in the fields right now... So what we do is we encourage them in our music program by traveling to different schools, and traveling all over Washington... and to get them to see that education is key to getting out of poverty. When you work in education, you see that. I think this is a great way to connect: through the power of music

Fitzpatrick-Harnish, K. (2015)

In both programs, mariachi offers an accessible, inclusive outlet for Hispanic and ELLs to participate in the school music program. The strong connection between the students, the music, and the greater community was integral in facilitating a music environment of belonging. Lind and McKoy note that “making strong community connections is both a result of and a support for culturally responsive teaching. By finding ways for your students to connect in meaningful ways to the community, and by tapping into the expertise of parents, grandparents, neighbors, and

friends, music programs can thrive (Lind & Mckoy, 2016.) Both mariachi programs reveal the power of this sentiment.

A final example of effective “confianza” in a music classroom is through journaling and private one-on-one communication between student and teacher. Regina Carlow uses Dialogue Journals as a tool to acknowledge and reduce the level of social and cultural isolation that ELL students might feel in her classroom. Carlow’s strategy does not punish ELL students for occasional inability to verbally engage. She notes, “In effect, dialogue journals provide an opportunity for ELL students to express themselves freely about issues that interest or concern them. Dialogue journals also serve to provide teachers with crucial background information about their students” (Carlow, 2016.) Positive relationships with students directly position educators to be more culturally responsive in the classroom. Carlow’s reflection is nicely aligned with Abril’s tip to learn more about students’ individual lives and histories: “By reaching out to children, you will gain a greater understanding of them, as they will of you. This knowledge will be useful in considering their needs when developing new lessons” (Abril, 2003.) This dialogue journal example is useful to demonstrate the variety of ways to connect with ELL students in the music classroom in a way that is not explicitly musical.

It is interesting and important to consider the benefits of an interdisciplinary pedagogical model in which music helps to facilitate the learning of a new language. In their research paper, “Music as an Interdisciplinary Tool: a Quantitative Analysis in the Elementary Foreign Language Classroom,” Aldeguer and Lavall (2012) found that the use of music for teaching ELLs is not a thoroughly researched topic. Out of 264 sources that focused on the combination of “music and english,” only 22 were related to the use of music as a teaching tool. They suggest that music

should not be an isolated resource for teaching english, but rather the integration of a natural human expression (music) to facilitate a distinct, separate human expression (English as a second language.) They note, “we are convinced that if we integrate music, a holistic and natural discipline, together with English as a second language, we will obtain positive results to accelerate the learning process” (Aldeguer & Lavall, 2012.) In their research, they surveyed 20 English language teachers between the ages of 25 and 45 in Valencia, Spain. They found that 95% of survey participants expressed interest in learning new teaching tools that use music, but only 25% expressed having sufficient music knowledge to incorporate music into a lesson. Additionally, 65% of participants considered music to have great potential for improved learning (Aldeguer & Lavall, 2012.) While this research doesn’t include compelling data with regard to the successes and failures of music as a tool for ELLs, it does clearly demonstrate that the participants value the motivation that music awakens within their students, and that they would be interested in pursuing music further as a teaching tool.

In another study entitled, “Music and Body Expression in the Processes of Learning and Teaching English, Spanish, and French,” Conseulo Quesada asserts that educators should establish all possible forms of communication (including music and body movement) as a means to demonstrate the full breadth of human emotion, experience, and opinion. Body movement and music, she suggests, are inherently inclusive forms of self-expression: “To sing, play an instrument, or move according to a specific melody or rhythm, one doesn’t need to know the traditional musical code” (Quesada, 2009.) While the music classroom does typically have a dominant culture and language that will be more easily accessed by students of the dominant culture, there is value in the notion that a great music educator may not use words to musically or

physically organize their students, particularly within the context of collective body movement or dance. In this way, body movement might be a worthwhile tool to nourish inclusivity in the music classroom. Quesada goes on to list a number of exercises that use music to align syllables and rhythm, vocabulary and pitch, and expression and lyrics. Learning a new language can be a vulnerable experience, and she interestingly aligns the vulnerability of learning a new language with the vulnerability of creating music: “It’s important that the student population thoroughly enjoys music and body movement as accessible languages, as positive and creative experiences, and that [music and movement] allow[s] students to express themselves without becoming virtuosos, and that they are capable of artistically expressing themselves in whatever way moves them or others” (Quesada, 2009.) It’s important to cultivate a classroom environment where students feel safe and comfortable taking risks. There is something liberating about sharing an artistic experience with classmates, be it silly or serious, and music/body movement allows space for the shared, new experience of learning a language. This is an interesting consideration for further research as we continue to seek out ways to support ELLs in the music classroom.

English Language Learners are a vulnerable student population whose experiences and backgrounds have much to offer music education. Our music curriculums, music classrooms, and student evaluation systems should reflect quickly shifting demographics to intentionally include and celebrate the young Hispanic and ELL students that seek a meaningful education.

Fitzpatrick-Harnish (2015) summarizes this sentiment well: “We may need to set a new definition of success for our music program that centers around the aim of developing music for our particular students’ long-term understanding of, appreciation for, and love of music... Do what works best for *your* students, *your* program, and *your* community.” If our goal as music

educators is indeed to facilitate transformative experiences through music, we must actively and intentionally position our students' particular backgrounds and learning needs at the center of our curriculum and pedagogy.