Creating Culturally Relevant Technological Operas in an Urban School

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**Abstract**
The project described in this study developed due to the gap in achievement between African-American and white students. As music teacher I noticed my urban students could rap all the words of popular songs. Therefore I incorporated the use of technology with an authentic need to learn reading, writing, and lyric development for science and history content within a "hip-hop opera". This study details the instructional sequence, in which students watched musical performances, learned songs with a karaoke machine, and wrote new lyrics for the songs based on history and science material. I combined the students' lyrics into new versions of the songs, which they then learned and performed within a dramatic opera. The mixed method research study, conducted in grade 2 through 6 music classes, addressed three questions: How does the learning process differ between culturally relevant hip-hop operas and culturally non-relevant operas? What do children who create culturally relevant hip-hop operas learn about history and science content compared to an opera utilizing music from outside the students' culture? How does creating a culturally relevant hip-hop opera impact students’ desire to learn science and history? A case study revealed that both culturally relevant and non-relevant operas could sustain students' involvement in history and science, but students were more eager to participate in instruction utilizing culturally relevant melodies. The quantitative analysis was limited by small numbers of participants with complete data, but some results were obtained. Learning outcome measures revealed gains on basic understanding of some history and science topics embedded in opera-based instruction, but the cultural relevance of the music did not impact the learning outcomes. A follow-up analysis revealed that involving the students in composition of lyrics based on any musical text, culturally relevant or non-relevant, led to greater learning gains than having students learn and perform texts written by the teacher. Analysis of interview results showed that some students increased their desire to learn history and science in school because of the opera instruction. The importance of research such as this aimed at improving urban education is stressed, and suggestions for further research are made.

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In this sense, culturally relevant pedagogies are rooted in a hope for transformation, and educators are conscious of the ways that students are implicated in an unjust social order. Educators work to make connections between student performance in school and the social arrangements that position students as more likely to fail in traditionally, seemingly meritocratic educational environments. The study that follows is one of possibility, not typicality. By providing his students with culturally relevant political instruction, the teacher in this scenario, Mr. Harrison, generated civic interest by using a recurring theme—immigration—that students found interesting and to which they could relate. Culturally relevant pedagogy is used as an analytic tool to explain and uncover the ways in which the teacher develops cultural knowledge to maximize student learning opportunities. The basic premise of the article is that this White teacher was able to build cultural congruence with his highly diverse learners because he developed cultural competence and concurrently deepened his knowledge and understanding of himself and his practices. While it is well established that the ability of teachers to build cultural competence is a critical aspect of their work especially in urban and highly diverse settings, the kinds of experiences that help them build cultural competence is less clear. Culturally relevant pedagogy in a diverse urban classroom. Urban. Review, 43, 66–89. doi:10.1007/s11256-009-0143-0. Addressing the seemingly perpetual turbulent landscape of urban schools, the role that elementary educators and teacher educators can play in reversing negative trends and trajectories is considered. Three urban education journals were examined over a 5-year period (2005-2010) to determine the emphasis on elementary students or schools. Of the 429 articles, only 8% focused on the elementary years. Schools and teacher education programs that are willing to learn from existing successful models and to straightforwardly and vigilantly address endemic racism in policies and practices offer the most...