

by Cara Bernard  and Brent C. Talbot

Music Teachers' Experiences with Implementing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Abstract: This article describes music educators' conceptions of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We collaborated with six music teachers to consider ways in which DEI is conceptualized and practiced in their own teaching settings. The teachers were carefully selected to encompass a multitude of identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, location, class, ability, teaching setting, musical background, and teaching experience. Through our conversations, we learned how these teachers locate their identities through their own narratives and how these social constructions converge in their work through pedagogical and curricular strategies. It is our hope that their insights might start a conversation about the current state of DEI work being approached in music education and provide suggestions for more diverse, equitable, and inclusive practices and policies in music classrooms.

Keywords: diversity, equity, inclusion, intersectionality, music education

Six music teachers from diverse geographical location share their views on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

For decades, educators have been invested in creating more diverse and equitable policies and practices for students. This pursuit has gained greater attention more recently in the music profession, where organizations like the National Association for Music Education have issued solidarity statements, created committees, provided funding for research, and organized conferences and publications dedicated to addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). As two music teacher educators, we find that issues surrounding DEI have been a central responsibility for us as we prepare practitioners to navigate the changing landscape of education and society. We have researched, published, and presented on topics related to DEI, many of which were influenced by our own experiences as K–12 practitioners teaching in urban settings. In our collaborations and discussions with music teachers, we have heard numerous times that defining and situating

DEI in schools and teacher preparation programs has often been presented in murky ways.¹

Although a quick Internet search yields myriad statements related to DEI, Chief Diversity Officer Robert Sellers at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, likens diversity, equity, and inclusion to various aspects of attending a dance:

Diversity is where everyone is invited to the party.

Equity means that everyone has the opportunity to dance.

Inclusion means that everyone gets to contribute to the playlist.²

Similarly, sociologist George Dei described that tending to issues of DEI is “not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone.”³ Despite the push to create a new space “for

everyone,” some have found that when schools initiate DEI work, discussions often begin from a perspective of race and visible markers of diversity and are less focused on the broader spectrum and participation of identity.⁴ Although race is an important construct of DEI, such framing might oversimplify and overlook unseen elements of identity, such as ability⁵ and class.⁶ Similarly, identities are not always easily located but encompass a range of backgrounds, lived experiences, and ways of knowing and being.

Knowing how these identities and experiences relate with one another is vitally important to cultivating a sense of belonging in music classrooms, among school populations, and the communities with which they interface. So, in practice, how might music educators embed deeper, more meaningful approaches to DEI in their curriculum and teaching settings?

We collaborated with six music teachers⁷ to consider ways in which DEI are conceptualized and practiced in their own teaching settings. The teachers represent a cross section of music education in the United States and were carefully selected to encompass a multitude of identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, location, class, ability, teaching setting, musical background, and teaching experience. Through our conversations, we learned how these teachers locate their identities through their own narratives⁸ and how these social constructions converge in their work. It is our hope that their insights might start a conversation about the current state of DEI work being approached in music education and provide suggestions for more diverse, equitable, and inclusive practices and policies in music classrooms.

“DEI Is Not Just about Identity and Representation”

When asked to describe diversity work in schools, the six teachers found that it was easier to discuss what DEI was *not* rather than what it is. Mason, a high school instrumental teacher from Albuquerque, remarked, “One cannot just

assume a place is inherently diverse.” He further stated, “For example, New Mexico is not quite Mexican, not quite Native American, and not quite Spanish, but some blend of all that. I think as people look around, they may automatically assume that New Mexico and our school systems are automatically diverse. But there’s more than what meets the eye.”

Many of the teachers articulated that the current polarized political climate clouds the ability of school personnel to lead this work, which yields more “disingenuous” presentations about DEI, as Melanie, a middle school choir teacher, described. The teachers also saw a lack of depth in how these goals are carried out in policy and practice. As Kelly, an elementary general music teacher in Maryland argued, “focusing merely on incorporating DEI concepts at a surface level misses the opportunity for application of the policies in our buildings and on our teaching practices.” Workshops and professional development sessions on issues of DEI are often very public, facilitated in large groups rather than small, intimate ones. As a result, the actions become more presentational—centered on disseminating information about DEI—which leaves teachers with a discomfort of figuring out how to implement tenets of DEI in their own ways.⁹

As a result of such presentational actions, the teachers mentioned that DEI is often focused on representation of identities. High school choral teacher Rebecca saw this focus on representation in her school initiatives in New York City, including honoring specific cultural months, such as Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month (AAPI), “where everyone puts up some pictures in the hallway and thinks this gesture makes our school diverse and accepting.” “While the intention is good,” she questioned, “what does this actually accomplish for our AAPI students, or any student, really, beyond a small moment of reflection? And how does it relate to actually creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive space in the classroom?”

Rebecca’s example served as evidence for the teachers to describe that

terms such as *diversity*, *equity*, and *inclusion* have become coded buzzwords in schools that have shifted away from their original meanings and focus primarily on representation. Mason called this “pseudo-inclusion” and described that this “looks like playing some random Mariachi song and overlooking the connections to people’s historical backgrounds or interests.” As a result, DEI issues have become more about what the teachers called “box checking” rather than meaningful implementation and practices for sustainable change.¹⁰

In the music classroom, teachers stressed that issues of DEI cannot solely be addressed by repertoire changes, such as adding more popular or multicultural music. Middle school orchestra teacher Matt described that online music databases for repertoire by underrepresented composers can be a good first step toward finding more “diverse” repertoire; however, it cannot be the only step because it can limit one’s curriculum and teaching to focus on identity constructions rather than the lived experiences of diversity and the social conditions that contribute to their understanding of the world. Similarly, box checking should not be a “one-off” model of introducing composers or different styles of music in the classroom. Rex, an elementary general music and choir teacher, reminded that DEI is “not about dedicating a class period to these issues, but weaving them throughout the year—even when you see students once every six days.”

Can you identify with the experiences of the teachers with regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work in schools?

How have issues of DEI been presented, documented, or implemented in your school and district? Do you think it has been more about “box checking,” or has it been more ongoing work? What have you found useful in your context?

Intersectionality as an Approach to DEI

Educator Anna Neumann asked teachers to consider, “How much of our ‘selves’

is inextricably bound into our work?”¹¹ In conversation, the teachers with visible identity markers described being the first to be called on by their colleagues to address issues of DEI in the classroom. Rebecca, for example, was asked to discuss race as a dark-skinned Latina woman; similarly, Rex, as an out gay man, was asked to speak about sexuality. Although these are important aspects of both Rex’s and Rebecca’s identities, they do not present a full picture of these individuals and the ways they see themselves in the world. Rebecca discussed that race was less a concern for her in her development because she grew up in a predominantly Latino/a/e community where she was surrounded by others who looked like her. Instead, class-based issues occupied much of her thinking about her relationship to others—especially with students and colleagues—because access to material resources was a consistent challenge that impacted her experiences growing up. As a result, she is more attuned to look for class-based concerns among her students. Teachers described that when they were essentialized to one singular identity marker, they felt important elements of their being were rendered invisible. This often led to a sense of isolation and feeling a lack of belonging in the school community. These overlooks demonstrate how the complexities of multiple identities are relational, illustrating the need for more nuanced and meaningful professional development and implemented curricular practices.¹² If teachers—who are called on to lead and mentor as more experienced beings in the world—feel unseen, imagine the impact this has on children and their learning and development.

Which elements of yourself do you see as “inextricably bound” to your work?

How visible or invisible do you feel in your workspace?

Can you identify ways your students may feel visible or invisible in the classroom?

Defining Intersectionality

Identities, backgrounds, experiences, and interests are constructed through the intersections of multiple dimensions, known as *intersectionality*. First coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw,¹³ intersections are fluid and affirm that people are members of different social groups simultaneously. Crenshaw¹⁴ pointed out that each identity marker is connected with all other markers in an individual; they are relational to one another. For example, at times, gender may be more present than race, whereas at other times, race may be more prevalent than class, and so on. One’s features of identity, then, cannot simply be observed separately.¹⁵ In other words, identities intersect and reinforce one another. Similarly, identities may intersect “to reflect varying levels of privilege and marginalization.”¹⁶

What words do you associate with diversity, equity, and inclusion? How would you describe these terms to another person? Take a moment to locate your own identities: race, class, gender, location, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, interest, language, religion. Fill out the social identity wheel in Figure 2. As you observe your responses, notice how each relates to one another. How do they intersect? Do some emerge more prevalently? Which ones? Which ones recede?

In an educational context, an understanding of intersectionality can allow for simultaneous interactions among backgrounds, such as gender, (dis)ability, migrant status, race, and class for any individual student.¹⁷ However, some have argued that schools fail to address the intersection of students’ identities and, instead, respond to only one aspect of students’ needs.¹⁸ For instance, the teachers reported that schools might provide a student with disability services or accommodations in relation to their disability while a newcomer student from another country might receive support with language learning or trauma

experience. But how might a teacher in the classroom respond to a student who has a disability *and* is also a newcomer learning a new language and acclimating to differing cultural norms surrounding gender, sexuality, race, and class from that of their country of origin? The teachers provided some possibilities for intersectional entry points in their curriculum and instruction in the following section.

Windows and Mirrors

Intersectionality is often missing from conversations about DEI. We see intersectionality as one way to implement DEI more meaningfully in schools and teaching. When asked about intersectionality, the teachers insightfully said that using the term was not the primary importance but, rather, how it is embedded in practice. For the elementary music teachers, this looked like incorporating materials where students could see glimpses of themselves—their backgrounds, interests, identities—while also learning about one another. Rex described using “windows and mirrors” in his teaching.¹⁹ As children’s literature professor Rudine Sims Bishop points out, windows and mirrors are about familiar, unfamiliar, strange, and imagined spaces. Sometimes a window—when lighting conditions are just right—can become a mirror that “transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience.”²⁰

Examples of materials that can serve as windows and mirrors in elementary classrooms include repertoire, recordings, and children’s books with multidimensional characters (race, ability, gender, urban/suburban/rural, etc.). Many song choices used in the elementary general music setting, for instance, might have didactic and gendered themes. Music teachers might consider if and how this repertoire can provide a mirror or window to try on different

roles—or selves—such as a witch, a cobbler, and so on—characters which might traditionally be gendered. In his general music class, Rex uses dramatic play to act out themes from various folk songs. He reminds students that “anyone can play any part.” This phrase is intended to invite all students to become, say, “the old woman who swallowed a fly,” or Johnny the construction worker who “works with one hammer,” or even a caregiver who sings a lullaby to a child. Engaging in these activities might bring a childlike attention to the intersection of societal or familial roles (gender- and labor-based) and, in turn, push past particular stereotypes.²¹

The metaphor of mirrors and windows can be a powerful—yet fragile—pedagogical tool within the classroom. As Melanie reflected, with windows and mirrors, “students can see themselves in the system that maybe wasn’t super friendly to the multiple facets of their identity in the first place.” Yet incorporating these ideas does not automatically give students a sense of their world. Just as our egos and sense of selves are fragile, it is important to remember that windows and mirrors can break, distort, fog, and refract. As such, drawing on the metaphor of windows and mirrors requires careful and intentional planning to honor the complexity of how each person’s intersectional identity is dynamic and may change over time and from one location to another; what might be privileged and important in one space may hold less importance in a different location.²²

Folk songs, children’s books, movement, and dramatic play can provide opportunities for students to “play a part,” or take on a new role.

Revisit a piece of music, book, or movement activity and consider it from a windows and mirrors approach. What might change in how students interact with these texts or pieces?

Projects for Intersectional Exploration

In our discussions, the secondary music teachers emphasized how their middle and high school students place great importance on social group dynamics and hierarchies. Adolescents often feel highly misunderstood as peers and adults reduce the complexity of identity, interests, and ways of knowing to one or only a few specific categories.²³ As a result, it is imperative for teachers to continually present opportunities that expand the ways in which students can see multiple parts of themselves and one another and make meaning of it. Music education professor Bridget Sweet discussed the importance of identity formation in adolescence:

We come to class hoping our students inherently want to search for meaning in

what we teach, but realistically, we have to provide clear and blunt answers to the “so what” question as well as how music will assist them on their journeys of self-discovery and identity formation. We do this by providing means for meaningful connections between what we teach and their own personal lives.²⁴

In the music classroom, then, *music* is the means used to address the social conditions of students’ worlds. The teachers we interviewed were very intentional about how to make such connections, drawing on a number of projects where students explore and express their interests, backgrounds, and social and communal affiliations. They acknowledged that knowing how to begin may often be the most difficult part of this work. The projects they presented here have served as starting points for them—as well as continuous

FIGURE 1
Personal Identity Wheel Worksheet²⁵

The Personal Identity Wheel Worksheet
Complete the wheel below to the best of your ability. The goal is to help you to identify your personal identity in conjunction with your social identity.

Are there any other personal identity markers not mentioned above that you feel are important to your own identity? (Such as favorites, pets, education level, etc.)

reference points—for planning and instruction. Although these examples have been used with secondary school students, they can also be adapted for elementary classrooms.

In her choral ensembles, Rebecca uses personal and social identity wheels to inform her planning and instruction. Beginning with a personal identity wheel, as seen in Figure 1, students consider their own interests, skills, and experiences. Rebecca weaves student responses into her teaching, often using them in warm-ups or as examples or imagery to aid in vocal technique or interpretation of a piece.

As the school year progresses, Rebecca then introduces a social identity wheel, inviting students to connect their personal backgrounds and interests to their social group affiliations. Figure 2 illustrates Rebecca’s social identity worksheet.

Rebecca encourages students to fill the social identity wheel out in whatever ways they are comfortable; they might write about their own identities, or they might respond to the prompts more generally (e.g., label the identities you think about most often), thinking broadly about how identities are enacted and positioned in their communities. The students’ identity wheels inform Rebecca’s choices in myriad ways. She invites students to develop themes for concerts that highlight their responses. Based on the students’ musical and cultural backgrounds and interests, she honors multiple ways of learning and making music, incorporating aural-based, vernacular, and indigenous practices.²⁷ Last, Rebecca carefully considers performance venues that will best honor students’ personal and social identities, including local schools, community centers, and elder care facilities; these venues serve to

provide a window through which students can envision themselves as artists connected to community.

Return to your social identity wheel from earlier. Knowing your students and context, consider how you might adapt and use this in your own classroom. How do you anticipate student responses can help in your planning and instruction?

Music teachers might create other projects as a launching point for DEI work. Identity-based projects²⁸ provide valuable information for teachers to make meaningful connections and provide intentional planning. Matt’s “Musical Me” project consists of “a survey and open-ended questions, where students introduce themselves as a musician, person, and artist.” Teachers can locate the intersections within and among student responses and incorporate them into

FIGURE 2

The Social Identity Wheel Worksheet²⁶

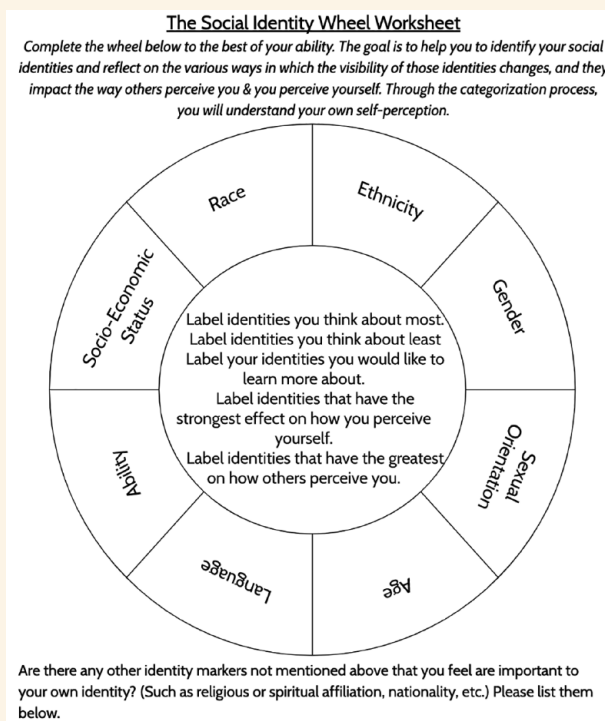


FIGURE 3

Example Applications of Intersectionality

Music Identity Project:

Select a number of songs and create a playlist that represents your identities through music. Choose one song from your playlist that you think best represents who you are as a person. Then, analyze and share this song with the group, describing not only important musical features of the song (e.g., lyrics, form, texture, instrumentation, mode, meter, etc.), but articulate how the piece you chose reflects aspects of your own identities and histories. Consider the following questions: Who was I . . . Who am I . . . Who do I want to become . . . as a musician? . . . as a learner? . . . as a performer? . . . as a listener? . . . as a composer?

Music teachers might extend the music identity project and invite students to create a visual representation—or badge of identity—of their playlist.

Badge of Identity:

Drawing from your playlist, construct a badge of identity that tells us about yourself. Use found materials—photos, magazine clippings, construction paper, markers, glitter, and so on.

These badges can be displayed on bulletin boards or around the room in a demonstration of the ways in which the students inhabit and curate the classroom space.

Musical Me Survey:

You are musical. You have been your entire life! The purpose of this assignment is to get you to think about and share bits of your own musical journey—the role music has and may continue to play in your life. Everyone's story is unique; this is a chance to share some of yours. Please respond thoughtfully and honestly to the following series of questions about your musical journey. I look forward to learning about and with you in our class!

NOTE: [Name of teacher] also is answering the questions. You'll see their responses below each question. This way you can learn about the teacher, too!

Teachers can create questions around topics including What are your musical interests? What instruments do you play? What is your earliest memory with music? How does your family engage with music? How do you engage with music in community or school or religious settings?

planning and instruction, from repertoire selection to discussion to small creative musical activities where students can compose, arrange, or improvise. We provide an overview of these types of projects, including assignment prompts to use with students in Figure 3.

Concluding Thoughts

Music teachers hold an ethical obligation to create opportunities for students to interact between various groups. Matt reflected,

I regularly tell the students that we're never one thing . . . we are complex beings. And that's something that is returned to throughout our year. Maybe during a moment of reflection, we might consider the various ways our identities

intersect or how a piece of music has impacted our thinking. How have we grown as individuals and as musicians?

These six teachers provide examples of how to honor and recognize the importance and complexity of each student's intersectional identity. "Though these are subtle," Matt reminded, "they are powerful ways to engage." Again, although it can be difficult to know how to begin DEI work in one's own classroom, small exploratory projects, like those presented by the teachers, can be implemented in meaningful and sustainable ways. Such experiences provide mirrors and windows for students to see themselves and others reflected in their music learning. In these ways, music can be central to the process of change and used as a tool to address the social conditions of students' lives.

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editor of *Visions of Research in Music Education*. She is co-author of the book *Navigating Teacher Evaluation: A Guide for Music Teachers*, published by Oxford University Press.



Brent C. Talbot has been a leading voice for change in the field of music education. A prolific author and frequent presenter, Talbot's work examines power,

discourse, and issues of justice in varied settings for music learning around the globe. He is the editor of one of the best-selling books in music education, *Marginalized Voices in Music Education* (Routledge); the curator of an indigenous-centering resource, *Gending Rare: Children's Songs and Games from Bali* (GIA); and co-author of the acclaimed book *Education, Music, and the Lives of Undergraduates: Collegiate A Cappella and the Pursuit of Happiness* (Bloomsbury). Talbot is professor and head of the Music Department at the University of Illinois Chicago. For more, visit www.brentctalbot.com

With contributions from the following music teachers:



Rebecca Martinez was born and raised in Queens, New York. She is currently a choral music teacher entering her eighth year of teaching at Fort Hamilton High School. There she directs a large mixed

ensemble and a treble chorus consisting of auditioned students and is the advisor of the a cappella club. Her ensembles have performed at the school's winter and spring concerts as well as adjudications and choral festivals at the University of Connecticut, Brooklyn, and Hunter College. Ms. Martinez is a current member of the Brooklyn College Conservatory of Music faculty. Rebecca Martinez has performed at Lincoln Center, the United Nations, and Carnegie Hall. She is a soprano singer who is classically trained. Martinez received an undergraduate and master's degree from Brooklyn College Conservatory of Music with a major in music education and recently

received her EdM in public school building leadership from Teachers College, Columbia University, through the Summer Principals Academy.



Kelly Reymann is a certified K–12 music educator. She received her bachelor's in music education from Gettysburg College in 2018 and now teaches PK–5 general music and chorus in Maryland

Public Schools. Kelly has been a licensed Music Together center director and registered Music Together teacher since June 2021.



Matthew Rotjan is an active music educator committed to fostering diverse and creative learning experiences in music education. As a public school music

educator, Matthew currently teaches orchestra at Scarsdale Middle School in Scarsdale, New York. Matthew is the co-founder and co-conductor of the Rockland Youth Orchestra (New York) and has served on the artistic staff as conductor of New York City's InterSchool Orchestras of New York. Matthew is passionate about connecting educational theory and practice and is regularly sought out for professional development, leading sessions with educators and administrators and writing curriculum. He regularly presents on this topic nationally, and his work has been published in *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*, *American String Teacher Journal*, *Music Educators Journal*, *Teaching Music*, *Tempo*, and *Visions of Research in Music Education*. Matthew holds degrees from Ithaca College (BM) in music education and performance (cello) and Teachers College, Columbia University (MA, EdM, EdD) in music and music education.



Melanie Stapleton is a choir director with seven years of teaching experience in Texas. She holds a bachelor's of music education from Louisiana State University and a master's of

music education from the University of North Texas. She is currently pursuing her PhD in music studies with a music education specialization at Northwestern University.



Rex Sturdevant is a Connecticut-based music educator and percussionist. He is the music teacher at Melissa Jones School in Guilford, Connecticut, where

he teaches K–4 general music. Prior to this, he taught PreK–5 general music and chorus at Skinner Road School in Vernon, Connecticut. Mr. Sturdevant has presented on topics such as teacher evaluation, project-based learning, and LGBTQ-inclusive teaching practices at the local, state, and national levels. Additionally, he has given guest lectures to music education classes at University of Northern Iowa, Texas Tech University, and the University of Connecticut. Currently, Mr. Sturdevant is on the education committee of the New Haven Symphony Orchestra and serves as the band chair of Laurel Music Camp. Mr. Sturdevant holds the MA in curriculum and instruction, BS in music education, and BA in music from the University of Connecticut as well as a Level III Certificate in the Kodály Method from Portland State University.



Mason Yordy has been the band and orchestra director at Van Buren Middle School in Albuquerque Public Schools for the past seven years. He received his bachelor's

of music education from the University of New Mexico and graduated cum laude. He recently has been New Mexico Music Educator Associations District 7's vice president of band. He is also 2021's New Mexico Music Educators Association's New and Emerging Music Educator of the Year. Recently, Mason presented a workshop during New Mexico's All State Clinic titled "No Excuses: Establishing Excellence in the Band Room." Mason works closely with his feeder high school and has participated in clinics for bands all over the state. Additionally, he was a judge for solo and ensemble and music performance festivals. Mason Yordy belongs to the Pueblo of Isleta in New Mexico.

NOTES

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