

# Music Teachers Reimagining Musical Focus, Function, and Performance for Newcomer Students

by Christopher Mena with Elia Bojorquez

In recent years, the number of immigrants and refugees to enter the United States has remained significant. According to Krogstad and Radford (2017), 84,995 were admitted to the U.S. in 2016 alone. Refugees bring with them not only culture, language, and traditions, but sometimes the scars, mental and physical, of horrendous experiences in the places they have fled. These issues necessitate teachers to develop specific skills that allow them to address refugee students' need for safety, academic knowledge, and opportunities to socialize and integrate into new communities. Arguably, opportunities for socialization and the development of community building capacity can determine success for many of these students. An additional component of their success can also come from having their cultural knowledge and experiences validated as a meaningful contribution to the school culture at large.

School music programs are uniquely positioned to create spaces for refugee and immigrant students to become socialized through participation for a variety of reasons. First, they can provide a space where students can interact without having to rely heavily on information gathered primarily through spoken language. Since refugee and immigrant students are often placed in English Language Learner (ELL) classes that may limit their engagement with the school community at large, participation in music can allow them to integrate gradually (and gently) in a low-stakes environment. In these spaces, students can often fully participate without having to speak a word. Additionally, music education programs do not have to adhere to stringent mandated curricular regulations, compared with heavily tested subjects like mathematics and language arts. Music teachers can develop activities with their students, not just test scores, in mind. The standards, goals, and desired outcomes are set by the practitioners themselves.

This curricular flexibility leaves the focus of music education open to a reexamination of its purpose, goals, and orientation toward inclusivity. Some institutions, like Harvard University, are anticipating a major shift in music education and have begun to restructure and expand their curriculum to embrace this diversity (Robin 2017); however, most music education programs still adhere to the conservatory model, which values a Eurocentric, Western, atomistic approach. Moreover, while some articles have been published on immigrants and refugees in music education, too few music educators have considered how to engage students beyond improving refugee orientation toward the host culture (Frankenberg et al. 2014) or move past decontextualized representations of heritage culture by emphasizing cultural context (Campbell and Lum 2008; Marsh 2012). This reality is in line with what Ladson-Billings describes with her comment, "manifestations of multicultural education in the classroom are superficial and trivial celebrations of diversity" (1998).

Music provides a perfect medium to foster human relationships because of its unique quality to engage people in a collaborative, creative, and expressive activity. Recent research even suggests that participation in music increases one's capacity for empathy (Rabinowitch et al. 2013). Since

music encompasses so many aspects of life and is present in a variety of settings such as religious worship, family life, or cultural celebrations, it is often deeply connected with cultural identity for immigrants (O'Hagin and Harnish 2006) and refugees (Marsh 2012). This common connection could allow individuals to develop social bonds through shared participation in a relevant activity that reinforces culturally meaningful practices. Since there are so few studies of refugee and immigrant students in music education that have examined the importance of a comprehensive understanding of students' home culture as a starting point for pedagogical interventions, it is currently unclear just how salient culturally relevant music participation is for strengthening these bonds; a massive gap from theory to practice exists.

Considering this background knowledge, this paper provides two examples of how music educators connected with community and campus resources to identity, recruit, and engage refugee and immigrant students. For these examples, I draw upon two cases from Southern California that illustrate that adaptation of music into the lives of newcomers in high schools. Using the concept of funds of knowledge (González et al. 2005) as a framework, I argue that music teachers can design powerful learning encounters for students that help them bridge the gap between home, community, and school.

### **A School Family of Guatemalan Marimba Musicians**

**by Elia Bojorquez, San Diego School Counselor<sup>1</sup>**

North County San Diego is an interesting place. It is a mostly conservative community that is often hostile to those who are not aligned with residents' view of "American values." Being a relatively successful and highly educated Latina, I have even felt unwelcomed at times. An example of this tension is illustrated by parental complaints about my bilingual voicemail message. On occasion, they remind me that "this is America, your message should only be in English." My thoughts turn to my students and the tension they must endure in this environment. I can't imagine how it must

### **Funds of Knowledge**

According to Gonzales et al., funds of knowledge are the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (2005). The central assumption of this approach is that students who come to school from immigrant and refugee families possess cultural knowledge distinctive from the dominant or mainstream culture of school. While this knowledge is considered valuable in the student's home, it is often found incongruent with the values promulgated in most classroom settings. Refugee and immigrant students often find themselves contending with the added pressure of abandoning their precious cultural practices to assimilate into classroom settings. To counter the negative effects of this assimilation, scholars using a funds of knowledge framework suggest that these cultural practices require teachers' recognition and validation.

The goal of this approach is to equalize power dynamics between schools and communities so that reciprocal relationships of respect can develop and dominant discourse regarding *whose* knowledge is valued in the classroom can be called into question (González et al. 2005, 40). Since there are often demographic disparities between music teachers and their students that can create tension (Abril 2009), this approach will provide teachers items to consider when attempting to engage students from refugee and immigrant backgrounds. This can be particularly useful in urban areas where refugee and immigrant communities are often resettled.

feel to be a newly arrived student in this hostile community. It must be scary and nerve-wracking, constantly trying to pick up cues, looking for a welcoming face, and dealing with the pressures that come with being a teenager.

In my 13 years of working at the same public high school, I've seen drastic demographic shifts. At one time our beginner ELL students were mostly from Mexico; now most are from Guatemala and other countries in Central America. The majority come from a particular region in Guatemala with a high Mayan population. The dominant language there is Q'anjob'al. I had the honor of traveling through Guatemala years ago and remember being amazed by the abundance of color: beautiful tapestries with intricate stitching adorned bare concrete walls and women wore bright clothing contrasting with black asphalt and shades of jungle green as they walked down highways with piles of wood on their backs. These vibrant visuals left me with a deep appreciation for the richness of that regional culture, which at one point seemed so distant but is now here in North County San Diego schools. Much like the beauty of the weavings found in their culture, the colorful personalities of these Guatemalan students contrasted brightly against the heart-wrenching stories of their journey to the U.S.

As a counselor, I've found enrolling newly arrived students as high schoolers a challenge. School policies mandate that students be placed in courses based on prescriptive academic and language requirements. Over time, I noticed that many of my students had huge gaps in their education because of social issues that precluded them from attending school in their home country. In one example, a newly arrived student had a 4<sup>th</sup>-grade education and was not successful in a required algebra class. Even with adequate language support the student lacked the conceptual knowledge to be successful. An additional factor is the pressure to start working and contributing to their families. Many are also living with a relative or in a situation where they are charged rent or have to pay toward legal fees with immigration attorneys. A student in this position is unlikely to graduate from high school in four years. Prescriptive education requirements compounded with financial insecurity make educational institutions particularly brutal, especially if the focus is on four-year college admission for all students and high-stakes standardized testing.

Although many aspects of these students' lives are out of the control of educators, we can work toward creating a more inclusive space. In my experience, as the number of Mayan students increased, so did their lunchtime visits to my office. To connect with them I played traditional marimba music on YouTube as they ate. During these visits I learned about their lived experiences. In one visit I shared that I had visited Quetzaltenango and admired their culture. Some shared with me that they played marimba music and told me of marimba concerts in San Diego. This made me think about a recent grant that our music department received to purchase a new marimba. To connect school resources to students' lived experiences and unique cultural knowledge, I offered to invite my ELL students to the music room during lunch one day.

During this visit, the students met our music teachers and were able to get full access to the music room for daily rehearsals. Initially shy, students emerged from their shells as they developed their musical skills. They were eventually invited to perform at an informal lunchtime talent show a few weeks later. Our music teachers immediately asked if they could transfer into a percussion class for second semester, but it was not possible due to a conflict with the master schedule (their sheltered English math class is the same period).

Admittedly, I was nervous about the invitation to perform in front of the school. One of the biggest issues these students deal with is the pressure to assimilate. Those of Mayan descent who were born in the U.S. or migrated as young children are able to pass as Mexican and often do not want others to know their indigenous background. In this climate of tension toward immigrants, I was concerned for them outing themselves as Guatemalan and they also expressed fear about this. This tension was so stressful that one of the main marimba leaders considered backing out of the event. They were also aware of how different their music was and worried that people wouldn't like it. We had a group talk about the power to change perceptions, about their opportunity to claim their space in this school. We also discussed the power behind their culture and identity. I got a reluctant agreement to follow through with the plans for their performance, although they made it clear that they may not consider it in the future. The day of the event came and I was a mess, worried about them. Soon these feelings subsided because my *marimberos* were a hit. Students they didn't know started coming up to them in their physical education classes letting them know how much they enjoyed the performance. It was through sharing their musical traditions with other students that they realized that they were safe. That they were liked.

As a counselor, I feel a great deal of responsibility for helping students be as successful as possible. I am starting a club to provide a more formal structure and make Guatemalan students' presence at our school more official. It has been my experience that these students try the hardest academically and really want to succeed. Although I can't always do much to alter school policies that ignore these students' experiences and unique needs, I can work on integrating their experiences and talents into part of our school culture and give them more reasons to hang on.

In my work, I am also overwhelmed with ensuring that students meet district and state requirements including standardized tests so I am forced to prioritize math, science, and English over other subjects. Since music education does not have required standardized tests it existed mostly outside my professional purview; however, it was this curricular flexibility that was so crucial to connecting with these students. Since they already acquired a musical background in Guatemala, the transition to the school music program was easy. There were no diagnostic tests to pass nor curriculum pacing guides to adhere to. They simply needed to show up and play.



*Shadrack practicing guitar.*  
Photo by Tsava Tuzolana.

Additionally, the low-stakes environment helped them to feel comfortable, allowed them to socialize, and provided an experience of success to develop valuable social capital. It was not until I connected students to the band director that I was able to see the transformative power of music on their lives, particularly in providing them a space to share their culture with peers.

### **Music Education in City Heights**

#### **Christopher Mena: San Diego Band Director**

From 2010 to 2015, I was the band director at Hoover High School in the San Diego neighborhood of City Heights. This community is one of the most diverse areas of the city

because of the large refugee resettlement center in its center. As a testament to the diversity of the school and neighborhood, the annual commencement address is presented in all 25 languages of students enrolled in the school, from Burmese to Navajo. It was here at Hoover High School that I “cut my teeth” as both a school band director and a teacher in an urban school. In most high schools, these identities rarely overlap because of the substantial financial investment required by the operating budget of a conventional music program. The reality is that Hoover High School, like most urban schools, cannot afford the luxury of a successful music program. Compounded by the parental perception that music is an ancillary activity that is always first to be abandoned in favor of more “academic” endeavors in tough financial times, I was in a situation for which my musical training did not prepare me. In my preparation for teaching, emphasis was on attaining the very highest aesthetic ideals for students over the achievement of sociocultural aims relative to family and neighborhood realities. These perceived curricular restraints left me with no recourse and few resources to navigate my ethnically diverse, economically underserved classroom. I was pressed to reevaluate the purpose and function of curricular studies in music as they reflect the lives of diverse student populations, including children of immigrant and refugee families.

One year a student from the New Arrival Center<sup>2</sup> joined my guitar class. Early in the semester I noticed that this student was excelling much faster than the others in the class. One day during students’ personal rehearsal time I asked if he already knew how to play. This question would alter my perspective on the hidden talent students bring to the classroom. He told me how he first learned guitar in a Congolese refugee camp in Tanzania and the great lengths that he and his friend would go to perform. I asked if he knew any songs from his country and he immediately launched into a polyrhythmic guitar riff far beyond anything that I was teaching. After a brief introduction, the most haunting Swahili falsetto cut the rhythmic density and conveyed the pure joy that music making must have brought him in the refugee camp. It was heartfelt, beautiful, and uplifting.

After this brief performance Shadrack shared with me his desire to develop a worship band at his church, which was why he decided to join music class. Over the years as our teacher/student relationship developed, I provided advice on how to run rehearsals and training on how to run the soundboard at his church. I visited a few times to observe and provide feedback. One Sunday he invited me to attend the Swahili language service at the church and I saw just how much joy Shadrack and his group brought to the congregation. This incident forced me to reexamine my purpose and approach for teaching music in a classroom setting. Shadrack was using the skills that he was learning in my classroom and blending them with what he acquired in the refugee camps to create a musical pace where he could help foster deep relationships in his community. Rather than emphasizing an atomistic approach to traditional musical literacy, this experience helped me shift my goals to create musicians capable of creating music to fulfill their specific contextual function based on community needs.

Recently, Shadrack was hired by the San Diego Opera as a teaching artist and to serve as a liaison for African immigrant and refugee students in City Heights. Through this project he is continuing to share his love of music with newcomer students from various countries and also using his unique perspective to help align the goals of the program with the specific needs of these students. In our last conversation, Shadrack mentioned that he was focused on teaching *soukous*, a widely popular Congolese style of dance music. When I first met Shadrack, I had no idea how far he would take the skills that I had helped him develop, but I knew it was important to get him involved as much

as much as possible. Since our first encounter in the classroom he has grown into an adept musician and an insightful young man who is helping to ensure the well-being of future generations of immigrant and refugee students from around the world. The transition into U.S. schools is often difficult for this population, but Shadrack is helping to provide a space where they can feel that their cultural contributions are valued.

This experience taught me several things about engaging immigrant and refugee populations. First, I learned the importance of valuing the knowledge that such students bring to the classroom. This knowledge, often gained from life experience, is what they will rely on to navigate new educational spaces. In Shadrack's case, the musical skills acquired from his previous experience were a way for him to become integrated into the school community at large. With a little guidance, patience, and hard work, he developed these skills to a point where he has now become a change agent within a school that serves immigrant and refugee populations. Second, I learned the value of developing relationships with these students. As mentioned above, they often have difficulty connecting with the school community. Some reasons for this include age differences resulting from disrupted education, language differences, conflicting cultural norms, and emotional stress caused by assimilative forces. Although Shadrack had strong community connections outside school through church, he often struggled with finding friends on campus. Becoming involved with the school music program allowed him to form his own community of musicians, which led to a greater involvement in campus culture overall. Lastly, I learned the importance of flexibility when working with immigrant and refugee populations. Their unique needs do not always map cleanly on the curricular offerings or academic requirements of a school. This reality necessitates creative restructuring of curriculum so that these populations are best served.

### **Conclusion**

Using music classrooms as the setting, these cases illustrate the importance of teachers being able to recognize and validate the funds of knowledge that their students bring to school. In both these cases, educators engaged students in conversations about their lives to gather information about their lived experiences and to determine how best to meet students' needs. Using the unique cultural information that immigrant students brought to the school as a starting point, teachers created a trusting space where students could participate in activities meaningful to them based on their needs and specific skillsets developed outside the music classroom. This process allowed students to integrate into their new settings and with their peers and teachers to acquire an understanding of students' families, communities, cultural practices, dreams, aspirations, and purposes for learning music.

Music is an integral part of identity development for adolescents, and campus music programs can be a site of transformative pedagogy that allows students and teachers to learn from (and alongside) their immigrant and refugee counterparts. As illustrated above, all teachers and educational stakeholders could benefit from evaluating their specific classroom contexts to identify how music functions in the lives of their immigrant student populations and how it can help them participate in the campus community at large. Such an evaluation may serve as a starting point for discussions that explore how to center instruction on the specific needs of immigrant and refugee students. To accomplish this, Fitzpatrick (2015) suggests that goal setting in music programs should be based on three contextual considerations: 1) The expectations of stakeholders such as administrators, parents, and community members, based in part on the history and tradition of our music programs;

2) the resources available to teachers to facilitate plans; and 3) the degree to which teachers are able to motivate students to be successful with the activities and goals that they have planned (70). Essentially, all stakeholders have a voice in shaping how their music programs contribute to the specific context of their campus and community.

The reality of changing demographics currently facing schools necessitates a shift in focus to include various perspectives in curricular decisions. These insights must be gathered from a thorough examination of specific learning contexts so that activities can best reflect the needs of the immigrant and refugee students being served. Additionally, educational stakeholders must be open to a diversity of meaning making in the world. For teachers to accomplish this, it is imperative that they validate students' funds of knowledge by incorporating them into classroom activities. Moreover, teachers should design their curriculum so that students find classroom activities meaningful to their home lives and transfer this learning to their communities. As seen with these two cases, this approach will help to increase student engagement and allow for both communities and schools to be more enriched by these experiences.

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#### **End Notes**

1. Pseudonym.
2. Sheltered English instruction center in schools for students who have been in the U.S. for less than 12 months.

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