

HIP-HOP'S DAUGHTER RAISED IN A CHORAL WORLD

10 Steps Toward an Anti-Racist Music Curriculum



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ILLUSTRATION BY MAKEDA BROWN

“Here we go again.”



This thought involuntarily sprinted across my mind as I awaited our guest choral clinician.

My current chorus teacher...we'll call him Mr. C... lost control of the choir a long time ago. Quite frankly, it was his fault. Did you really expect a group of kids to have respect for a teacher who belittles them at every turn, only allows them to learn music by rote when they've begged to continue learning rep through solfège, and puts kids in very uncomfortable performance positions? Kids who consistently made local, state, regional, and national choirs? Kids who consistently won competitions? Kids who performed at Carnegie Hall twice within the last five years? And you really think gettin' one of your homeboys from some fancy AC/DC—whatever choir organization— to come and teach us for three days is going to turn this program around?

I attended one of those magnet art schools; one could imagine the lunchroom looked like something out of an episode of *Fame*...and sometimes it did. It was pretty obvious that a bunch of artsy kids were not “about that life”—or at least that's what my childlike naivete led me to believe. If I had to guesstimate, I would say our school's demographics (also reflected in the choir) were 70% White, 29% Black, and 1% Latinx, Asian, and other Persons of Color. Some choir teachers would clutch their pearls if they had that many Black kids in one class. Regardless of our demographics, we were ALL stellar kids and our disciplinary rap sheet would make the holiest of nuns look like America's Most Wanted. So when you have performing arts kids skipping class to go smoke a cigarette, you have an issue—and more than likely, you're the problem.

Between life outside of school and trying to survive Choir Purgatory 101, good students began to morph into bad students. Some days, it was hard to tell them apart. As for me, well, I was not about that life whatsoever. First and foremost, I was too much of a goody-two-shoes and my parents were crazy. The fear of my teachers calling home and my parents returning my head to school on a silver platter, John the Baptist-style, played constantly in the back of my brain like reruns of *Friends*. I rebelled in other ways. Although I attended choir class consistently, I was never there. I no longer tried out for solos or advanced ensembles. There was no point in showing enthusiasm to learn new songs because...well...none of the songs were new or difficult. How am I supposed to be excited about songs we already sang in middle school?

It didn't help that I was beginning to find my way as an artist and tap into my cultural roots. One could say that I was beginning to have an awakening. In a world full of Black girls daydreaming about marrying Quincy McCall, this Brown Sugar, sun-kissed goddess already fell in love with hip-hop and was accepted by its relatives. I loved everything Black, including Black music, and I sported an afro to let it be known to the entire world. I would pay any price to hear Leontyne speak to me.

Denyce's voice resurrected souls from Graves. The way Alicia's fingers moved across segregated Keys could rival any white composer on your list. I beg your pardon, but Whitney's voice could move mountains and rearrange furniture that not even Dolly's could shift. Lupe's rhymes sent you into a Fiasco. Real People could testify to the goodness of Common's music. Fantasia's voice would make you beg for Summertime in the middle of January. Why were heroes that look like me only brought up in choir when it was time to discuss slavery, or when the subs were left with the movies *Drumline* and *The Temptations* biopic for the class to watch???

For so long, I was covertly taught that being able to perform, read, and understand the music theory of choral literature composed by White men was the ultimate achievement. Every clinician I've ever worked with on a local, regional, and national level: White. The demographics of the honor choirs that accepted little ol' me: predominantly White. Our repertoire for these honor choirs: White, until the very end of the concert where they'd bust out the "fun" Negro spiritual... which was probably arranged by a White composer. The posters of "Great Composers" hung throughout my high school choir classroom, whiter than Reaganomics Cocaine.

I hate it here. Mentally, I checked out of the choir a long time ago and so did my peers. Mr. C bringing another middle-aged White man into our classroom for three days was not going to resurrect this choir.



When I finally zoned back in, standing in front of me was a three-piece-suit-wearing Black man, pacing the floor and listening to R&B. At this point, I'm confused because I felt already met the majority of the Black choir parents. "Who dat?" I asked my best friend. She shrugged. We were both lost and awaiting answers.

Mr. C stood in front of the class to gather the choir's attention. The room went silent; we knew how to "put on" when guests arrived.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let's welcome Mr. Jeffery Redding!"

The Black man in the three-piece suit removes his earphones, wraps them around his iPod, puts it in his pocket, and begins to command the room. "Hello, my name is Jeffery Redding. Here's what I need to happen," he said as he began to point in various directions. "I want my sopranos here, my tenors here, my basses here, and my altos here. I don't want anyone sitting next to their friends, and I don't want any of the Black students sitting next to each other. MOVE!"

I did not move. I needed a few moments to allow gravity to bring me down from this out-of-body experience.

Wait...he's Black???

He looks just like me.

Those were the thoughts that involuntarily ran laps around my mind when I met Jeffery Redding at the age of 17.

Seventeen...

It took 17 years of me being on Earth to see a Black man in front of a school choir. It took another 5 years, 22 years in total, to see a Black woman in front of her school choir—it was me. Meeting Mr. Redding truly changed my life.



You may think this is just another Black girl telling a heroic tale, where the White guy is the antagonist, and the Black guy comes and saves the day. Because of its rarity, I would love to see more stories with a Black savior; but that's not the point. Truth be told, this is a depiction of how one person can use their power to create a safe or unsafe space for Black Students and/or Students of Color—no matter the teacher's race, color, sexual orientation, or beliefs. What I failed to mention is that the teacher prior to Mr. C was a gay White male, and we loved him. He respected and loved us just the way we were. He never belittled us. He set the bar high and made sure we reached even higher.

Did I believe Mr. C was racist at the time? It never really crossed my mind for two reasons.

First, although my school was pretty diverse, I often found myself being the only Black student in my all-honors and AP academic courses. Instead of lifting my head to see the racism around me, my head stayed down in a book to prepare for classes, because I'd be damned if I get a question wrong (aloud or on paper) and become known as the “dumb n****r” of the class. I wasn't just studying for myself—I was studying on behalf of my Black peers at school. Today, people call this beast “perfectionism.” I call it by name: internalized racism and self-destruction.

Second, if you were to ask this intellectually woke late-bloomer in 2007 if I felt Mr. C was racist, I would probably say, “No, I just don't think he knows what he's doing.” According to Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, there is no such thing as a “not racist.” In the present day, do I believe Mr. C was an anti-racist? Absolutely not. Do the math. In speaking with former high school classmates, I know for certain that several of the Black students within this choir program were negatively impacted by their experience. However, to this day, I argue that I don't think he was aware of the effects of what he was doing...like most teachers. Notice, I did not specify “White teachers” because, quite frankly, there are Black Music Teachers and Music Educators of Color who have created environments that are racist and do not affirm our Black babies, which is ultimately detrimental to the growth of Black students.

If a teacher who is overtly or covertly racist decides to maintain or further abuse their power when placed in an environment similar to my former choir classroom (or any classroom), this can be damaging to Black Students and Students of Color. Mr. C may not have noticed how damaging these experiences were because his choir's résumé was filled with accolades that looked promising on paper. You may not have even noticed some of the experiences and behaviors within my depiction of Mr. C's classroom that could prove to be damaging in any classroom and toward any child, specifically Black students. Allow me to highlight the experiences that could be considered racist so that you can recognize them, dismantle them, and build a true anti-racist music classroom.

1. DIVERSIFY YOUR CURRICULUM

For so long, I was covertly taught that being able to perform, read, and understand the music theory of choral literature composed by White men was the ultimate achievement...Mr. C bringing another middle-aged white man into our classroom for three days was not going to resurrect this choir.

The first (and sometimes ONLY) thing that comes to the minds of music educators is “diversify the repertoire.” Think about the repertoire you have performed over the past two years. What group of people does your music represent? Yes, it is very easy to choose repertoire and find ways for all students to connect to it. But if you were to invite the composers of your musical selections to your class, would you have a culturally diverse body of musicians? How often and when do you perform pieces written by Black Composers or Composers of Color? Do you only perform them at the end of your concerts for the “showstopper” effect, or do you teach Black and cultural music with the same amount of time and energy as your other selections? When you perform cultural pieces, how extensive is your research for executing these pieces with as much authenticity as possible? If you are a Black Conductor or a Conductor of Color, does your ensemble only perform one style of music? When you bring in guest clinicians to your classroom, how often are they non-White or of one particular race? When you take your students to experience music outside of the classroom, is it representative of several communities? Are you a choral director stuck in the past and not willing to teach music outside of the choral genre? Have you considered teaching and allowing your students to perform pop, R&B, hip-hop, K-pop...you know...current musical genres that appeal to the kids?

I understand that these are tough questions to answer, but it is important to understand that the journey to diversifying your program does not start at repertoire selection and end at race. *A truly diverse music program allows ALL students, regardless of race, color, creed, beliefs, and interest, to be seen in EVERY facet of the music program.* I also completely understand that the lack of variety in musical selections is not necessarily because the teacher does not want it to happen; they simply do not know how to make it happen. Fellow educators: It is not your fault. Many of our universities and conservatories do not teach us HOW to teach Black and cultural music.

Although your music education degree may have failed to provide you with the pedagogy necessary to teach a specific style of music, it is not too late. If you desire to be a vocal exemplar for your students when teaching Black and cultural music, take voice lessons from professional voice teachers. Participate as much as possible in clinics and workshops offered by national organizations, local colleges, and churches. And last, but not least, do not be afraid to enlist assistance. Request Persons of Color who are church musicians, local musicians, and expert clinicians to work with your students. Contact nearby Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) for professors who would be available to contextualize the repertoire for the choir. Trust me—your students will not think any less of you. This is an opportunity to have students network, work with, and be exposed to various colleges, clinicians, and musicians. And while your students are receiving the experience of a lifetime, you will be in the back of the room, taking notes and developing professionally.

2. DO NOT SING OR PERFORM REPERTOIRE OR PRODUCTIONS THAT SCREAM:

“BLACK LIVES DON’T MATTER”

Did you really expect a group of kids to have respect for a teacher who...puts kids in very uncomfortable performance positions?

Does the music you wish to perform place your kids in a position that demeans them or makes them feel less than who they are? Does your selection of music say, “This is the music we are going to perform, and your culture or feelings don’t matter”? Do your show selections allow ALL races and genders to be seen? Are your students required to alter their looks (e.g., skin color, hair texture, physical features) to fit the description of a character within the musicals you choose? Are the roles that are meant for Black People/People of Color given to talented students who naturally fit these descriptions, or have you given these roles to White students who may be less deserving?

The last question may have shocked many of you, but this is a common thing seen within the field of performing arts. I witnessed this firsthand as a student at an art school. During my junior year, our high school chose *Big River* as the biennial musical. Although the music and storyline from this musical are pretty good, it forced all of the Black students to play the roles of slaves, even down to the leading character. Two years later, our school decided to tackle *The Wiz*. The Black students were ecstatic and extremely eager to showcase their talents. This excitement faded quickly after the cast list was released. In a school where there were plenty of talented Black boys and girls, the role of Lion was given to a White male, and they chose a Black Dorothy and a White Dorothy. The Black Dorothy would perform for the schools during the matinee shows, while White Dorothy would perform for the community during the evening performances.



A great performance should never sacrifice the worth of your students.

3. REVISE YOUR HANDBOOK

I loved everything Black, including Black music.
and I sported an Afro to let it be known to the entire world.

Being a part of choirs, bands, and orchestras can often feel like being a part of the military. Music educators are drill sergeants on the day of performances. We line up our troops to make sure they have every component of their attire, everyone’s hair is of natural hair color, hair is not in their face, facial piercings are removed or replaced with clear jewelry, hair isn’t too tall, and makeup is not too gaudy. Before the performance, we even give our troops a speech about the importance of the “conservative” look and how it can be distracting to audience members if we do not look unified.

Fellow educators, we are teaching young musicians—some of the most expressive people you may ever encounter. If you have Black Students and/or Students of Color, then you are teaching THE most expressive people on the planet! Black people are lively, colorful, and expressive, even down to our hair

(aka, our “crown”). Students should not be forced to alter the texture or color of their hair to perform. Furthermore, if ANY student forgets a minor piece of their uniform (e.g., shoes, pearls, cummerbund), it is not the end of the world. Are you *REALLY* about to hinder your best soprano from singing because her hair is pink and she forgot her pearls? The better question is: Why didn’t you keep an extra stash of pearls just in case someone forgot theirs? Is your tenor’s afro *REALLY* going to distract the audience during his solo where he just so happens to sing a high C at the end?



Take a look at the uniform requirements within your handbook, cut out the specifications that are creatively asphyxiating and culturally deprecating.

4. BE MINDFUL OF YOUR PHYSICAL CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

The posters of “Great Composers” hung throughout my high school choir classroom—whiter than Reaganomics Cocaine.

Yes, even the posters you choose to hang on the walls of your rehearsal space matters. It lets your students know who you hold in high regard. Do you believe the music and the artists your students listen to have any value? If so, prove it. If not, the posters on your wall will show.

Several educators have also asked me about the most important part of the classroom: the students who fill the chairs. “How do we recruit more Black students?” The answer is simpler than you think—just RECRUIT. If you have everything in place (variety of rep, fun and safe environment, etc.), all you have to do is either go out and ask students to audition for your choir or have choir members bring their friends to a choir rehearsal/performance. You will be surprised by who your choir members know. It is also very important to ask yourself, “What is my reasoning for wanting to have a diverse ensemble?” If you believe that recruiting Black Students and Students of Color will bring a certain sound or simply make you feel like you’ve checked off one thing on your “I’m not a racist” list, you’re recruiting minority students for all of the wrong reasons.



Physical representation within your classroom will ring louder than the music you’ll ever create.

5. MAKE SOLIDARITY MANDATORY

I don’t want anyone sitting next to their friends.
and I don’t want any of the Black students sitting next to each other.

Although I’ve been the only Black student in White spaces throughout the majority of my educational experience, when our high school choir was rearranged by Dr. Redding, it was the first time I was ever forced to acknowledge I was uncomfortable being an isolated Black spot in a sea of Whiteness. This moment was very hard for me to internalize because I felt that I was cool with everyone, no matter their race. At this moment, I realized that if I had the choice, I’d prefer to sit with my own because I

was comfortable and I could trust them. I cannot offer the point of view from the opposite end of the spectrum, but I often felt like my White counterparts felt the same. After Dr. Redding physically shifted the placement of Black students within this rehearsal space, I took it upon myself to begin observing this notion of segregation in various spaces: the cafeteria, academic classrooms, restaurants—clusters of races scattered within these open areas. This was in 2007. Cafeterias, music classrooms, and restaurants that I observed prior to the 2020 quarantine still proved to be reminiscent of segregated venues from the 1950s.

If you gave your students the chance to choose their seating within your music classroom, would it look like the 1950s? Educators, we have been given a great responsibility to teach our students to learn to see the color of one's skin and love them regardless. *Do not teach your students to see past each other's skin color—there is history and beauty on the surface and underneath it.* Take time to allow students to learn about each other outside of the music. *Host bondings and outings where the students can begin to learn how much they have in common, instead of only seeing their differences. Break the racial tension within your ensemble and make solidarity mandatory by any means necessary.*

6. MAKE A WAY FOR EVERYONE TO PARTICIPATE

Kids who consistently won competitions?

Kids who performed at Carnegie Hall twice within the last five years?

Every Black experience is a Black experience, even if it's a different Black experience. Black people share many similar experiences, but this does not mean every Black experience is cut with the same cookie cutter and the same dough. When I was in high school, my parents were able to afford choir fees and to send me on yearly choir trips (including two trips to Carnegie Hall). They were also able to pay for my younger siblings' dance fees and annual trips. Some of my Black friends were not able to foot such a large bill and were left to miss out on several valuable experiences.

Do you have options such as fundraisers, sponsorships, donations, and grants readily available to ensure EVERY kid can participate in ALL activities? If not, there is a great possibility that this will affect your Black students, especially given the statistics for Black public school students in the United States.



Find a way for all students to participate—or make one.

7. BE MINDFUL OF THE WAY YOU HANDLE BEHAVIORAL ISSUES

Between life outside of school and trying to survive Choir Purgatory 101.

good students began to morph into bad students...

So when you have performing arts kids skipping class to go smoke a cigarette, you have an issue—and more than likely, you're the problem.

Black students are subjected to more disciplinary actions and receive less compassion for their mistakes. According to research conducted by the United Negro College Fund, Black students spend less time in the classroom due to discipline and are nearly two times likely to be suspended without educational services than their White peers.

Black students join our choirs for the same reason as other students: they love to sing, they want to be part of a family, and they want to be themselves. *When we immediately take away an opportunity from a kid because of their behavioral issues, we have let a great teachable moment pass us by.* I often think about some of my Black students, specifically my Black boys, who came into my choir with behavioral issues. I think about how I could see through their wall of defiance and how they just wanted to belong. I think about how that wall began to come down brick by brick as they made friends, poured out their emotions through songs, and started to find their sense of purpose through music. I often tear up when I think about their successes: all-state choirs, national honors choirs, creating ensembles, receiving local attention for their accomplishments, performing for Grammy award-winning artists and other prestigious people. Just imagine if I were to remove them from my program after the first or several behavioral issues? *The walls guarding the heart are only demolished with love and time.*



Behavioral issues will disappear over time, but the first step toward remedying them is taken when you...

8. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH ALL PARENTS AND STUDENTS

Some days, it was hard to tell them apart.

Students can walk into my classroom or log into Zoom and I can tell if they are having an off day or not. I also know what triggers each individual or what topic can put a smile on their face. I know which of my students are prepared to lead sectionals without hesitation, and which students would attempt to walk out of my classroom if I asked them to sing in front of their peers. I can text my students' parents and let them know that little Johnny did an awesome job in class today. Some parents will contact me ahead of time to inform me that their child may not be on their A-game because there are some family issues. Some parents are also not afraid to say they may need assistance with payments for a trip or activity because I've created a culture of "no fear, no embarrassment."

Kids AND parents will not care how much you know if they know how much you care. You must know your students and their immediate families to truly understand who they are, how to navigate future waves of emotions, and how to help them reach future goals. This could be done through weekly ensemble updates, keeping an open-door policy, surveys of interests, and simply bonding with your kids. Having these mediums of communication allows ALL students AND parents to feel truly invested and a part of the program.

9. DON'T ALLOW BLACK KIDS TO SETTLE. AFFIRM THEIR GIFTS.

Did you really expect a group of kids to have respect for a teacher who belittles them at every turn, only allows them to learn music by rote when they've begged to continue learning rep through solfege...

There was no point in showing enthusiasm to learn new songs because...well...none of the songs were new or difficult.

Why were heroes that look like me only brought up in choir when it was time to discuss slavery, or when the subs were left with the movies *Drumline* and *The Temptations* biopic for the class to watch???

I have done several paid gigs for recording artists over the past year, which required me to learn new music by ear within twenty-four hours. Recently, I had only one hour to learn the second alto part for Nathaniel Dett's thirty-page "The Chariot Jubilee" before the final rehearsal, which was, of course, the day before the performance.

All students, including Black students, are capable of reading music. The MAJORITY of Black students (not all) tend to have good ears for harmony and learning music by rote because of our deep roots in oral tradition...and because it is learned and practiced over time. Oddly, some teachers believe that Black kids can only learn music by rote—and they act as if the skill itself is a terrible thing. Because of their presumptions, these same teachers are led to believe that their Black students cannot read music, when in reality the teacher is simply not teaching at their highest capacity.



A major step in creating an anti-racist curriculum is making sure all students, including Black students, are given a quality music education inclusive of teaching students how to learn music by rote and note. This not only makes them well-rounded musicians, but it prepares them for all fields of music.

All students, including Black students, have preferences in music genres based on culture and environment, which is a very beautiful thing. This does not mean that Black students are incapable of learning music outside of the Black music genre umbrella. ***Do not put Black kids in a box.*** Black individuals are capable of being more than what the media may portray us to be. We are doctors, lawyers, scientists, preachers, teachers, presidents, vice presidents, senators, and more. If you are reading this, then you also know that we are creatives. The media often portrays creatives and athletes, especially our Black ones, as being worthless and offering nothing to our society. ***Whatever your Black students desire to be within the world of music, it is your job to aid in catapulting them to the stars.*** If they wish to become a rapper, find or make a way to foster that talent within your choir. If your students wish to sing genres outside of choral music, find or make a way to equip your students with the vocal flexibility to sing whatever genre their hearts desire. If your students want to learn how to produce beats, find a way to make it happen. ***Whatever your students dream to be, be their rocketship, not their gravity.***

10. CHECK YOUR BIAS AT THE DOOR

It was pretty obvious that a bunch of artsy kids were not “about that life”—or at least that’s what my childlike naivete led me to believe.

Some choir teachers would clutch their pearls if they had that many Black kids in one class.

Whatever you think you know about Black People and Persons of Color based on social media, whatever you may have heard through the grapevine, or just your pure imagination, erase it. Once again: Every Black experience is a Black experience, even if it is a different Black experience. Not every Black girl has an attitude. Not every Black boy has hoop dreams. Not every Black kid loves hip-hop. We come in every shade and size. Sometimes we’re lit. Sometimes we’re shy. *Regardless of who we are, we all want to be loved and known for our souls. We each have a different story. Are you willing to take off your biased lenses to read it?*

Think about the blessings you are possibly blocking: Job opportunities missed because of your preconceived notions regarding working in an urban school district; Black Students and Students of Color refusing to stay in your program because of your covert or overt racism; refusal to perform certain genres of music because you don’t see the value in it. *If you are not willing to see our beauty, learn about us, and love us for who we are, we will know. Ultimately, you have no control over who enters your program. Your subconscious will always pass microaggressions through your kids; they will feel it, and they will call you out on it.*



IF YOU REFUSE TO CHECK YOUR BIAS AT THE DOOR, TEACHING IS NOT FOR YOU.

Creating an anti-racist curriculum does not come with a checklist that you can simply mark off and, once you’ve completed it, you’re officially not racist. It requires years of reflection and internal work. You cannot expect to see solidarity within your classroom if you still hold on to racist ideals yourself. Reading my story and suggestions is merely a step in the right direction, and I hope it encourages you to take action.



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