

You Cannot Teach an Empty Chair:

An Affirmational Approach to Recruitment, Retention, and Representation

Midwest Band & Orchestra Clinic 2025 - Chandran J. Daniel

What is our greatest resource?

- “You Cannot Teach an Empty Chair” is a philosophy that is born from teaching in under-resourced schools, high needs schools, and small schools.
- The students in the room will always be our most important and crucial resource.
- The quality of your pedagogy will not matter to the students that are absent from the room.
- The long and short term health of your program will largely be impacted by the program’s capacity to recruit and retain students.

Who is in the room?

- Who are the students that sign up for your ensemble classes?
- Use school report card data to see if your ensemble truly represents the student population:
<https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/>
 - This includes Racial/Ethnic and SES data.
 - What trends does the data illuminate?

Who is missing from the room? Why?

- Engage in deep reflection and analysis as to what barriers exist to access to the program:
 - Financial
 - Scheduling
 - The importance of meeting student needs: ie % on FARM.
- Demystify the stereotypes as to why students do not participate in ensembles.
- How ineffective recruitment exacerbates disparities in demographic representation.

Access Points:

- Do you have a path for students to enter ensembles at any point during their time in the school system? What are your on-ramps? Is “beginning band” (or equivalent ensemble) the only on-ramp to enter the program?

What is an “Affirmational” approach?

In her book “**Can We Talk about Race? And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation,**” author Beverly Tatum explains that **affirmation** refers to the act of acknowledging our students’ identities by providing opportunities for them to feel “**seen, heard, and understood.**” [1]

The Affirmational approach is:

- One that prioritizes students feeling “seen.”
- One that attempts to both see and acknowledge the whole student.
- One that prioritizes letting students know that they are wanted.
- One that prioritizes students feeling valued.
- One that roots all program goals to the specific benefit of students. (Remove self from the equation. Focus in on the individual student over the ensemble)
- One that uplifts students at every opportunity.
- One where students feel represented by the material or instruction.
- An approach that aims to identify and eliminate barriers for access and increase your points of entry.

From Matthew Batesky's article **"What's in a Name? Five Ways to Affirm Students' Identities"** [2]:

- Take time to learn how to properly pronounce your students' names.
- Use inclusive language.
- Select repertoire or listening examples of various cultures and composers.
- Remove the "I am color-blind" or "I don't see race" mentality.

Why does representation matter?

- Yale **DECLARATION ON EQUITY IN MUSIC FOR CITY STUDENTS:**
<https://www.declaration.yale.edu/declaration>
- Representation doesn't just benefit our students, it benefits you as well!
- When we foster diversity, it tends to grow exponentially.
- Students are electing to be in this space—they need to know that they are electing to be in a space that feels safe, where they will feel respected, and their personal selves will be protected.

Nuts and Bolts—Practical Best Practices:

- Recruiting is a year round process
- Good pedagogy is the key to retention—most kids quit because they are frustrated with their playing. Very few quit because they are too good.
- Multifaceted communication
- Access points, options for late starters

How to better represent our students:

- Composer Diversity Database (www.composerdiversity.com)
- "... and we were heard." <https://www.andwewereheard.org/>
- If you are having trouble finding repertoire that meets your needs, do the work to commission it. Those programs with the resources to take the lead on these projects help benefit the many that do not!

Citation and Additional Reading

[1] Henninger, J. (2021). Affirmation and Representation in the Music Classroom. *Southwestern Musician*, 24-27.

[2] Batesky, M. (2017, August 29). What's in a Name? Five Ways to Affirm Students' Identities. EdAllies.
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Yale School of Music (2018). Declaration on Equity in Music for City Students: A Report on the 2017 Symposium on Music in Schools. Retrieved from www.declaration.yale.edu/declaration

The Horizon Leans Forward: Stories of Courage, Strength, and Triumph of Underrepresented Communities in the Wind Band Field by Erik Leung

Music Education for Social Change: Constructing an Activist Music Education By Juliet Hess

High Needs, Monumental Successes: Teaching Music to Low-Income and Underserved Students by Donald Stinson

Urban Music Education: A Practical Guide for Teachers by Kate Fitzpatrick-Harnish

The Oxford Handbook of Social Justice in Music Education, edited by Cathy Benedict, Patrick Schmidt, Gary Spruce, and Paul Woodford