

2018

The Teaching Approach of a Notable African-American Music Teacher: An Intrinsic Case Study

C. Michael Palmer
Ball State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme>

Recommended Citation

Palmer, C. Michael (2018) "The Teaching Approach of a Notable African-American Music Teacher: An Intrinsic Case Study," *Visions of Research in Music Education*: Vol. 31 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme/vol31/iss1/7>

The Teaching Approach of a Notable African-American Music Teacher: An Intrinsic Case Study

By

C. Michael Palmer
Ball State University

Abstract

This intrinsic case study examined the teaching philosophy and practice of Victoria Miller, a notable African-American music educator in Detroit. Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of social constructivism and Black feminism, I sought to answer the following research questions: (a) How does the teacher describe her teaching? (b) How do her students describe her teaching? and (c) How does her cultural background as an African American woman teacher influence her teaching? Data collected for this study consisted of field notes, teacher interviews, student interviews, and artifacts. Analysis of the data yielded four dominant themes: (a) Religious influence on teaching practice, (b) an ethic of caring, (c) identity as an “othermother,” and (d) use of music as a vehicle for empowering students.

Keywords: Social constructivism, Black feminism, othermother, African American teachers

Palmer, C. M. (2018). The teaching approach of a notable African-American music teacher: An intrinsic case study. *Visions of Research in Music Education, 31*. Retrieved from <http://www.rider.edu/~vrme>

Introduction

The study of P-12 urban music education has become an important topic among music educators and researchers in recent years (Doyle, 2014; Frierson-Campbell, 2006a/2006b). Researchers have explored themes such as access to music education (Costa-Giomi & Chappell, 2007; DeLorenzo, 2012), predicting enrollment and persistence in music education (Kinney, 2010), motivating urban music students (McAnally, 2006), the effects of music education and mentoring on under-resourced urban adolescents (Shields, 2001), underrepresented minority groups in music education (DeLorenzo & Silverman, 2016), as well as how urban teachers negotiate the complexities of urban education (Abril, 2006; Fitzpatrick, 2008; Smith, 2006). Although many studies focus on the challenges of teaching in the urban environment, more are necessary in documenting the pedagogy and teaching philosophy of successful urban music educators. As Abril (2006) noted, “In an effort to improve the condition of music education for those in greatest need, we must learn from the examples of others” (p. 77).

According to the 2007-2008 Schools and Staffing Survey (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), 83% of full-time secondary school teachers are white, 7% are black, 7% are Hispanic, and 3% are “other”. In view of the nation’s rapidly changing demography, there have been calls for a more diverse teaching force within general education (National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004) and music education (Clements, 2009; DeLorenzo & Silverman, 2016; Palmer, 2011; Spearman, 1999). King (1993) noted the limited number of talented African Americans teachers in schools and the obstacle this posed for the African American community in education, career advancement, and social mobility. Serious attention is necessary to address the

race and cultural gaps between the growing population of students of color and teachers in our nation's schools.

All students benefit from a diverse teacher population; however, studies have also indicated that students of color benefit academically, personally, and socially to a greater extent when they teachers of their own ethnic group teach them (Amuleru-Marshall, 1990; Hamann & Walker, 1993; King, 1993; National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004). In addition, students of color are more inclined to consider a teaching career when taught and mentored by teachers of color (DeLorenzo & Silverman, 2016). A more diverse teaching force, in turn, impacts curriculum, developing culturally response and representative content and practices (DeLorenzo, 2012; Spearman 1999; Quiocho & Rios, 2000).

Noting the ways in which teachers of color serve as role models for their students and communities is an important step in understanding how these teachers inspire and empower students to achieve. King (1993) suggested, "Much can be learned from the successful, pedagogical practices of African American teachers in terms of the successful education of African-American students" (p. 142). Examining and explicating such pedagogies may further strengthen the call for greater diversity in education and suggest ways in which we may be able to recruit more people of color into the profession.

In general education research, there have been studies of effective and successful African American teachers (Bray, 2008; Case, 1997; Irvine, 2002; Ware, 2006). Within music education, there are fewer studies documenting the life history or pedagogy of individual African American music teachers. The ones that do exist are historical studies (Anderson, 1988; Lyle-Smith, 1994), historical narrative (Thomas, 2010), or pseudo-case

study (Samuels, 2009). Among these four, only one is a study of an African American female teacher. This study was an effort to add to the music education research literature of exemplary African American educators.

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to examine the teaching philosophy and teaching approach of Victoria Miller, a notable African American female instrumental music educator in Detroit. Another term to describe Mrs. Miller is a “woman teacher” which is consistent with black feminist/womanist literature (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). The research questions guiding this qualitative inquiry include:

1. How does the teacher describe her teaching?
2. How do her students describe her teaching?
3. How does her cultural background as an African American woman teacher influence her teaching?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks used in this study are social constructivism and Black feminism. Creswell (2009) clarified social constructivism, stating:

Social constructivists hold assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences – meanings directed toward certain objects of things....Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically....[Researchers] focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work, in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants. Researchers recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation, and they position

themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences. (p. 8)

In this study, I developed a portrait of a teacher based on observations, interviews, and artifact analysis. I viewed these observations through the lenses of my own experience as a white teacher of black students in a historically black university as well as my general life experience as a teacher. Similarly, I interpreted the interviews with Mrs. Miller with the understanding that her experience is strongly rooted in a personal, social, and historical context. This context includes her identity as an African American woman growing up and working in Detroit, beginning her teaching in what was “one of the worst school areas of Detroit” (interview, 11/2010), her strong religious beliefs, her lifelong desire to help others, as well as her educational background and interest in music, sociology, and educational psychology.

The other framework used for this study is Black feminism (womanism). This is a theoretical perspective that consists of an understanding of oppression, belief in individual empowerment and collective action as important steps for social transformation, and a humanist desire to liberate all people (Collins, 1990). A type of mother figure described within the Black feminist literature is the *othermother*. Othermothering is African American women’s maternal care and assistance offered to children of other mothers (Case, 1997). According to the literature, exemplary African American women teachers can be othermothers if they have strong relationships with their students inside and outside the classroom (Case, 1997; Dixson & Dingus, 2008). It was evident to me during my first meeting with Mrs. Miller, prior to conducting this study, that she had a nurturing and loving relationship with her students. In accordance, I

chose to use this framework to focus on her ethic of care, as a guide for seeing beyond my white male identity, and to gain a broader understanding of Victoria Miller's experience as an African American woman in music education.

Method

I chose a case study design for this study because it is the study of a bounded system (i.e., a person within a context)(Creswell, 2007). Specifically, this is an intrinsic case study, resembling aspects of narrative research, yet maintaining the analytic procedures and description of the case (Creswell, 2007). Stake (2005) suggests an intrinsic case study “is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but instead because, in all its particularity *and* ordinariness [author's emphasis], this case itself is of interest” (p. 445). In this instance, I wanted to tell the story of an African American female music teacher who succeeded and persevered in spite of many social and economic challenges of teaching in an urban public school.

Primary Participant

The primary participant (i.e., the intrinsic case) in this study was Victoria Miller, a veteran public school music teacher for over 40 years. She requested that the study included her real name rather than a pseudonym. Born in Detroit, Mrs. Miller and attended Detroit Public Schools and Wayne State University. She began her teaching career at Spain Middle School (1974-2001), where she developed the music program and became chair of the fine arts department. Twenty-seven years later, she became the band director at Martin Luther King High School. She was a highly-revered teacher in the Detroit Public Schools through her teaching, development of award-winning music

programs, and success in bringing her students to various parts of the globe, including London, Switzerland, Hawaii, Japan, Africa, and China. In 2010, she received the Mr. Holland's Opus Award for her achievements.

Data Collection

The data collected for this study consisted of field notes, teacher interviews, student interviews, and artifacts. I collected field notes from three classroom observations involving music ensemble rehearsals as well as an after school marching band rehearsal. In addition, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with Mrs. Miller. To obtain her students' perspectives, I interviewed a group of three girls and a group of three boys one time. I transcribed and audio-recorded all interviews. Finally, to triangulate data, I analyzed artifacts such as concert DVDs, concert CDs, classroom materials (e.g., inspirational poems, songs, and sayings), student class assignments, and students' written statements about the band program. The data collection occurred over a six-month period.

Research Site

This study took place during the 2010-2011 academic year at Martin Luther King High School in Detroit with permission of the building principal and exemption by the University of Michigan Internal Review Board. Formerly a choice school in Detroit, King had a reputation of being a strong academic preparatory school. According to the Detroit Public Schools (2011) at the time of this study, King High School had a population of approximately 1300 students, 99% of whom were black. Two-thirds of the population were in the free or reduced lunch program.

The high school building opened in 1968 and its run-down appearance reflects its age. (The school has since undergone renovation.) Due to financial constraints in the

school system at the time, the administration eliminated the school's custodial staff, further contributing to the deteriorating conditions. And like many inner-city schools, safety was a primary concern, requiring a metal detector at the entrance of the school. A security staff monitored the hallways while classes were in session.

Despite the austere physical conditions of the school, my interactions with students, faculty and staff were always polite and positive. I was always greeted in the hallways and given directions when needed. I also noted students wore a uniform consisting of black bottoms and a white top, according to the district dress code policy.

King Band Program

In order to understand the uniqueness of this case, it was necessary to examine the context of Mrs. Miller's teaching environment. The band program at King High School consisted of two beginning bands, a symphonic band, a jazz band, and a marching band. Rehearsals took place throughout the day and after school in the band room, a space that seemed to be a second home for many band students. Above the chalkboards, shelves displayed numerous trophies and awards the band received over the years. On another wall, the saying, "What We Believe, We Can Achieve" hung above two racks holding black and gold marching uniforms.

The school district provided students with instruments; however, beyond instrument repair, it was unable to provide a budget for the program. The band's fundraising activity, which occurred on a daily basis, paid for any supplies, music, uniforms or travel expenses. For example, students purchased snacks and lunch items sold out of a practice room during the day, and on weekends, they sold these items on

street corners. Mrs. Miller's legendary ability to raise money for her program in the community was an important reason why she was able to travel with her band so widely.

Due to limited instrumental music programs in middle schools throughout the city, the majority of band students began playing their instrument in high school. Mrs. Miller strived to quickly develop the beginning students' abilities so that they could participate in the marching and symphonic bands. Another challenge she faced was scheduling and its effect on enrollment in the symphonic band. Mrs. Miller's creative solution was to volunteer her time by holding daily rehearsals after school, on weekends, and every day throughout the summer. She explained, "I work with them all summer long. I could have worked this summer and made twenty-something dollars an hour...but I didn't. I work with the band in the summer [and] don't get paid. I keep it going to keep my band program strong" (interview, 11/2010).

Despite the above-mentioned challenges, Mrs. Miller's top groups consistently garnered top ratings at local, state, regional and national festivals. Her commitment to developing her students as people and musicians and her belief in achieving what many think as impossible motivated countless students over the years. One former student wrote, "Being in the King Band has changed my life so much. It kept me away from drugs, gangs, violence, and it's a scholarship for college" (artifact, 5/2011). Another wrote, "King Band is more than just a bunch of kids with talent; to me it's a family and it's my second home....This band has gave [*sic*] me a whole new outlook on life. The band along with Mrs. Miller has showed me what it means to be dedicated, hard-working, and faithful" (artifact, 5/2011).

Analysis and Credibility

I conducted triangulation of data sources consisting of observations, interviews, and artifacts to establish credibility of the case. As I analyzed each interview, new questions emerged that I included in the next interview's protocol. Once I completed transcribing all interviews, I analyzed them through an open coding and axial coding process (Mertens, 2005), and verified the trustworthiness of interview data through a member-check procedure. As connections among codes appeared among all sources of data, broader themes emerged, leading to major thematic findings: (a) religious influence on teaching practice; (b) an ethic of caring; (c) othermother status; and (d) seeing music as a vehicle for empowering students to succeed. The following section elaborates on these themes.

Findings

Religious Influence on Teaching Practice

Faith and religious belief played a significant role in Mrs. Miller's approach to teaching. During each interview, she explained the role religion plays in her life. "I just let God speak through me. Doing His will, I just pray and ask to do His will" (interview, 11/2010). When confronted with adversity, she had faith that things would work out. There were numerous times when the band was preparing to travel, but lacked the necessary financial resources. Mrs. Miller stood firm in her belief that things would work out:

You have to believe in the impossible. But you have to work and do all that you can do....There's a saying that they have at my church...it's like, you step out, even though you don't see the staircase...[and] it appears. (interview, 11/2010)

In another difficult situation involving an unsupportive school official, students and parents urged her to speak out against him. But she stated, “You can’t keep hate in your heart and mind, ‘cause you will have no room to accept the love that God has for you. So, I teach that to parents and students” (interview, 11/2010). At one point, I asked her if she saw herself “not just a music teacher, but a ‘people’ teacher”. She replied, “And like a minister. ‘Cause I’m religious and I know the power of God. I think that that’s my calling...” (interview, 02/2011).

An Ethic of Caring

An ethic of caring includes attention to students both inside and outside the classroom while firmly encouraging students’ academic growth and success (Ware, 2002). Ware provided a description of the unique characteristics and pedagogy demonstrated by black teachers, based upon cultural context. In addition to caring for students’ needs and creating a caring classroom environment, black teachers believe in their students and their ability to learn, achieve, and aspire to leading successful lives. “She cares” said a senior band student describing Mrs. Miller. “Her heart is in what she does. And she doesn’t settle for anything less. She is not really a perfectionist, but excellence is what she strives for” (interview, 05/2011). Mrs. Miller acknowledged this:

They know I care. They know I love them. And they need to know that somebody does care about them, that no matter what, I try not to ever give up on anybody. And they shouldn’t give up on anything or anybody either ‘cause a lot of them are ignored. (interview, 02/2011)

Mrs. Miller characterized her teaching approach as one centered on “building people”. She said, “I’ve just found that if you build people, if the children have

confidence in themselves, they'll play better and they will be better people. I want them to be successful in life and whatever they want to do" (interview, 02/2011). It was a calling that developed during her childhood. "[Since] the seventh, eighth, ninth grade, I've always wanted to work with people and help people care about themselves and believe in themselves more" (interview, 11/2010).

Mrs. Miller's approach to "building people" was a multi-faceted, complex process that occurred over time. Starting in the Beginner's Band and continuing through all her performance ensembles, she had her students regularly read inspirational poems, songs, and stories that speak of triumph over adversity and the power of belief in one's self. They would listen to a performance of a song, such as "To Dream the Impossible Dream" from *Man of La Mancha* and discuss its meaning and relevance to their lives:

That's one of my favorite songs. From *Man of La Mancha*, you know, to dream the impossible dream, to right the unrightable wrong, to bear the unbearable sorrow, and all this. And it's like my quest. I played it for them yesterday. I let them read the words and we talked, I talked about it a little bit, and I let them hear the song sung by the man on YouTube. When the fellow finished, someone started kind of clapping and I went in and I just started talking about believing. (interview, 11/2010)

Other exercises include examining students' personal perceptions of themselves and their outlook on life. A sheet of paper passed out to the Beginning Band asked questions, such as "What do you like about yourself? What are the things you need to change about yourself? What are the things you would like to change that seem impossible? How will you pay for college? What will you do if you don't go to college?"

(artifact, 5/2011) Answers to these questions represented a wide diversity of opinions and self-perceptions among students, providing Mrs. Miller valuable information about how much “building” she would have to do.

Additionally, Mrs. Miller cared deeply about the future success of her students. Many students come into the band program without strong future aspirations. Yet through their experience in her program, many come out with a sense of confidence and belief that they could succeed after high school. Asked if this were part of her mission, she responded:

Oh definitely, definitely, yes, I do. I try to get them to decide what they’re going to be and sometimes they don’t know in what field or area they want to go in. And I usually have assignments where I do things like look at the jobs that are going to be here 20 years from now, or 10 years from now. I have them do research on it. And we talk about it....You know, it’s a slow process teaching them to believe and want to achieve, set goals, and determine what they want to do. (interview, 02/2011)

Othermother

Another way of interpreting Mrs. Miller’s approach to teaching is viewing her as a mother figure. A senior female band student remarked, “Ms. Miller is like a mother figure to all of us. She teaches us a lot of things. She tries to keep us out of trouble. She talks to the girls about just keeping ourselves together and acting like young women” (interview, 05/2011). Similarly, a senior male student added, “When I think of Ms. Miller, I think her as like, she could be another mother to me ‘cause she always there, she

always try to help and encourage us to do better. And she just wants us to succeed in life” (interview, 05/2011).

In African and African American culture, a community-based form of maternal care known as *othermothering* exists. Tracing its roots to West Africa, and later, to the time of slavery, it has been a method of care and survival for members of the African American community (Collins, 1990). It is also a means for educational and cultural transmission (Case, 1997), as illegitimate African American children, orphans, children born into poverty, and the other children in one’s neighborhood have the support of othermothers.

Othermothering is an ethic of care nurtured in African American women by older family members (older sisters, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers) beginning at a young age; however, not every African American woman develops into an othermother. Those who do, develop their abilities through their care of younger siblings and/or neighborhood children (Collins, 1990). Mrs. Miller claimed to have developed othermothering characteristics as a result of the attention she received helping others during her childhood. “It didn’t seem like people cared about me as much, so I would get attention by helping people, and doing things” (interview, 11/2010). When asked if she considered herself an “othermother”, Mrs. Miller responded, “I know some people say, they call me ‘Mother Miller’, ‘Grandmother’ now....Some of them think of me as a mother, ‘cause I do care about them” (interview, 05/2011).

Caring for her students extended far beyond her duties as a teacher; Mrs. Miller frequently provided students with monetary assistance, transportation, and food. A female student remarked, “I can say that she makes sure that we have everything we

need. Like somebody needs to take the ACT and don't have the money, she'll provide you the money to do it" (interview, 05/2011). A male student commented, "...She is not afraid to make sacrifices. Like, we have a late practice one day and [someone needs a ride home]....She'll take you home, no matter where you live" (interview, 05/2011). And Mrs. Miller regularly provided treats, such as pizza "twice a week" (interview, 05/2011). When she was particularly proud of the students' accomplishments, she cooked for them. "So I made them spaghetti yesterday and I mean it's more meat than even spaghetti in there....Some kids are so picky, they don't eat this and they don't eat that. But, they eat my spaghetti" (interview, 05/2011).

By the time they reach age 40, some othermothers achieve "community othermother" status. As Collins (1990) explained:

Community othermothers work on behalf of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability...to 'uplift the race' so that vulnerable members of the community will be able to attain the self-reliance and independence essential for resistance. (p. 132)

Resistance, in this context, refers to the response of living in a community beset by social, economic, and political challenges.

Mrs. Miller was conscious of the need to uplift her students and community. She said, "People just need so much hope these days" (interview, 02/2011). And a lot of kids are just looking for a place to belong. They're lookin' for love. So, we provide a safe haven for them to be" (interview, 11/2010). When working on the self-perception exercise with her Beginning Band students, Mrs. Miller noted:

As you read those papers, you'll see that some of my beginners are so shallow. They don't know who they are. They don't know what they're about. But as I go through some of those things with them, they'll become better, you know, I tell them 'Take 'em home and share them with your parents'. Adults need things like that too. (interview, 02/2011)

Her students also noted her community othermother status. "If our parents say we can't do this, she know how to make our parents say, "Yeah, they can do it'. You know, she like a grandma too! That's a grandma" (interview, 05/2011).

Finally, community leaders also acknowledged her othermother status as someone who is a role model for others. Mrs. Miller recounted to me that, out of humility, she was hesitant to accept the Mr. Holland's Opus Award. In an exchange with one of her former school principals, she remembered that the principal encouraged her to accept it because "You make [the school district] look good. You make women look good. And you inspire other people and people need inspiration" (interview, 05/2011).

Music as a Vehicle for Empowering Students

The life changing experience that the King Band Program provided to many students empowered them to believe in themselves and to achieve. As Mrs. Miller explained, "It's through music I teach people how to love themselves, how to work with other people, and how to be successful" (interview, 11/2010)...They don't have to ever play an instrument when they leave here. I want them to be successful in life and whatever they want to do" (interview, 02/2011).

The opportunities to perform regularly in the community and throughout the world inspires students to look beyond their personal circumstances and experience what

hard work and success can bring. But more important to Mrs. Miller are the values they learned through the process of rehearsing and fundraising. “Every trip I’ve gone on, God has shown them that there’s nothing impossible if you work hard and you do all you can do” (interview, 11/2010).

In order to accomplish these goals, Mrs. Miller always expected a level of excellence. “I have high expectations...I’m like this, whatever you expect, you will get. If you don’t expect them to do much, they won’t” (interview, 11/2010). One prominent example that surfaced during my interviews with students was their trip to Beijing for the 2008 Olympics. Many people doubted the band’s ability to raise the funds to travel to China. A senior male student described it this way:

[Ms. Miller] kept sayin’ everyday, ‘If you believe it, you can achieve it’. We were out fundraising and we raised well over a hundred thousand dollars. And the [band members] believed that anything we wanted to do in life, we could do it. (interview, 05/2011)

Another aspect that related to her fundamental belief in helping others was her cultivation of student leadership. Because she was financially unable to hire a marching band staff, for example, Mrs. Miller worked with students in developing leadership abilities by holding weekend retreats at her home. “It’s like a six or seven hour session and we go through, and read through [a packet of leadership materials]. And it talks about what a good leader is. I don’t believe leaders are born, I believe you can teach people to be leaders” (interview, 02/2011).

The King Band also saved students’ lives, by providing an activity and a safe place to be, keeping them off the streets. Mrs. Miller explained, “There’s so many people

out there calling our kids and trying to say, there's gangs, there's drug dealers, there's pimps, there's everything out there trying to get our kids to do the wrong thing" (interview, 11/2010). She recalled two examples of students who attended band practice while their neighborhood friends became victims of a shooting.

Participating in the King Band provides many students with the skills and performance experience that enabled them to receive scholarships to attend college. Some of the historically black colleges and universities offered substantial scholarships to King Band students on account of their musicianship and willingness to participate in collegiate ensembles. To develop these opportunities further, Mrs. Miller arranged to take her students to these college campuses for performances and marching band festivals to encourage them to make connections and apply to college.

To this day, former students keep in touch with Mrs. Miller, taking time to thank her for the opportunities she provided them and for opening doors to future ones. In an email she sent me after the final interview, she wrote: "One of my former students was talking to the band yesterday and said that you don't realize the value of the program until later in life" (interview, 05/2011).

Discussion

In a study of seven teachers in the Boston Public Schools, Nieto (2003) found that "The teachers who believe in and push [disadvantaged students], who refuse to accept anything less than the best from them, often make the single greatest difference between a life of hope and one of despair" (p. 15). As this study illustrated, Mrs. Miller is a poignant example of this type of teacher in view of her teaching philosophy based on

religious faith, love for her students and community, and the willingness to do whatever it takes for her students and her program to succeed.

Researchers studying urban music education noted similar challenges teachers face in their programs. In his study of three urban music educators, Abril (2006) found that one teacher, Michael Rhodes, faced the challenge of providing beginning instrumental music instruction to ninth grade students due to program elimination in earlier grades. Yet, he was successful in quickly developing their abilities to perform challenging literature within a few years. Another teacher, Sarah Rivers, noted how students who are economically disadvantaged may hold anger about their situation and how she strives to build self-esteem and hope through self-improvement. Rather than dwelling on the challenges and societal conditions of the urban environment, she focused on helping students feel successful by making good choices.

In a study of Chicago Public School teachers, Fitzpatrick (2008) learned that participants believed that teaching in urban schools required special skills, they lacked sufficient funding for their programs, they had to come up with creative solutions to urban challenges, and remained committed to improving students' lives. She also learned that teachers care for students inside and outside of school, they have high expectations of students, and have a moderately high level of job satisfaction. The specialized skills of urban music educators described by the participants included being creative with resources, showing concern/care for students, spending personal funds to help students, having a strong philosophy for wanting to teach music, selling the importance of the program to the community, and getting students to buy into the program. Mrs. Miller exemplified each of these characteristics.

Examining the challenges and success of urban teachers, Smith (2006) discovered that teachers who grew up in an urban environment often understand the social milieu and needs of students. Having been born and raised in Detroit, and having attended Detroit Public Schools, Mrs. Miller was intimately familiar with her environment and the needs of her students. McAnally (2006) explained the importance of meeting students' basic needs, such as food, clothing, and providing a safe environment. Mrs. Miller regularly provided these to her students so that she was able to orient their attention to personal and musical growth.

Ladson-Billings and Henry (1990) explained that African Americans' culturally relevant pedagogy focused on students' life, experience, culture, particularly those elements that relate to the Black church experience. It was evident that Mrs. Miller's pedagogy was strongly influenced by her faith, and it was her faith that sustained her throughout her teaching career. She was not afraid to acknowledge her students' challenges or position in society (Ladson-Billings, 1992); however, she always sought to provide a rigorous curriculum to prepare them mentally to rise above their circumstances and achieve something greater than they were able to imagine.

Mrs. Miller's ethic of caring for her students and greater community exemplified her role as an "othermother". In general education, studies illustrate effective and successful African American women teachers using their othermothering skills within the classroom (Baeuboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Case, 1997; Ware, 2006). Mrs. Miller was protective of her students, shielded them from adversity, and worked to develop their self-esteem through achievement and success in the classroom. "Exemplary African

American women teachers use the familiar and familial mother-child relationship as a guide for their interactions with students” (Beaufoeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 74).

“Mother” Miller’s approach to teaching was reflective of her identity as an African American woman teacher. Drawing on her faith and her own experience growing up in Detroit, she understood and acknowledged the relationship between school and society. She understood the need for educating black and other marginalized youth to recognize the injustices and challenges in society and sought to empower them to overcome them. She was ultimately concerned for the whole child rather than focusing solely on fostering musical and academic success:

Being a womanist educator entails more than simply having a professed love for children: A womanist educator loves children, especially those considered “other” in society, out of a clear-sighted understanding of how and why society marginalizes some children while embracing others. (Beaufoeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 80)

Conclusion

Victoria Miller was an inspirational urban educator whose teaching philosophy and approach serve as important guides for those aspiring to teach in urban schools. Often, studies of urban education focus on the difficulties or challenges of teaching in urban settings, while fewer studies highlight the successes of urban music teachers amidst adversity. It is important to learn from studies that portray the unique contributions of individual educators, specifically their personal characteristics, teaching philosophy, and ability to effectively teach diverse learners. Analysis of specific pedagogies born out of

one's racial and cultural identity help us to understand the ways in which great teachers, like Victoria Miller, can inspire students to learn, grow, and succeed in life.

Additional research examining the teaching pedagogy of music teachers of different races and cultural traditions is necessary. Who are the exemplars among Latina/o music teachers, Asian American teachers, and other non-European American groups? What is unique about the pedagogies of these teachers? How do the pedagogies compare to those of European American teachers? How do the experiences among teachers of color differ by school context (i.e., urban, rural, suburban)? In what ways can the study of these pedagogies inform and contribute to recruiting a more diverse teaching force in music and other areas of education? Providing examples of successful teachers of color and their unique pedagogies based on cultural and life experiences may help to inspire more students of color to consider a teaching career.

References

- Abril, C. R. (2006). Teaching music in urban landscapes: Three perspectives. In C. Frierson-Campbell (Ed.), *Teaching in the urban classroom: A guide to survival, success, and reform* (Vol. 1, pp. 75-95). Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Amuleru-Marshall, N. R. (1990). *An analysis of definer and role model selection patterns among African-American high school youth*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.
- Anderson, P. W. (1988). *Isabele Taliaferro Spiller: Harlem music educator, 1925-1958*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.
- Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (2002). A womanist experience of caring: Understanding the pedagogy of exemplary black women teachers. *The Urban Review*, 34(1), 71-86.
- Bray, P. M. (2008). *A life history of Dr. Nettie Webb: Possibilities and perspectives from a life committed to education*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts.
- Carter, P. L. (2005). *Keepin' it real: School success beyond black and white*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Case, K. I. (1997). African American othermothering in the urban elementary school. *The Urban Review*, 29(1), 25-39.
- Clements, A. (2009). Minority students and faculty in higher music education. *Music Educators Journal*, 95(3), 53-56.
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Costa-Giomi, E., & Chappell, E. (2007). Characteristics of band programs in a large urban district: Diversity or inequality? *Journal of Band Research*, 42(2), 1-18.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- DeLorenzo, L. C. (2012). Missing faces in the orchestra: An issue of social justice. *Music Educators Journal*, 98(4), 39-46.

- DeLorenzo, L. C., & Silverman, M. (2016). From the margins: The underrepresentation of black and latino students/teachers in music education. *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 27. Retrieved from <http://www.rider.edu/~vrme>
- Detroit Public Schools. (2011). *Martin Luther King Jr. Senior High School*. Retrieved from <http://detroitk12.org/schools/school/529>
- Dixson, A. D., & Dingus, J. E. (2008). In search of our mothers' gardens: Black women teachers and professional socialization. *Teachers College Record*, 110(4), 805-837.
- Doyle, J. L. (2014). Cultural relevance in urban music education: A synthesis of the literature. *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*, 32(2), 44-51.
- Fitzpatrick, K. (2008). *A mixed methods portrait of urban instrumental music teaching*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.
- Frierson-Cambell, C. (2006a). (Ed.). *Teaching in the urban classroom: A guide to survival, success, and reform* (Vol. 1). Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Frierson-Cambell, C. (2006b). (Ed.). *Teaching in the urban classroom: A guide to survival, success, and reform* (Vol. 2). Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Hamann, D. L., & Walker, L. M. (1993). Music teachers as role models for African American students. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 41, 303-314.
- Irvine, J. J. (2002). (Ed.). *In search of wholeness: African American teachers and their culturally specific classroom practices*. New York, NY: Palgrave.
- King, S. H. (1993). The limited presence of African-American teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 63(2), 115-149.
- Kinney, D. W. (2010). Selected nonmusic predictors of urban students' decisions to enroll and persist in middle school band programs. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 57(4), 334-350.
- Ladson-Billings, G. & Henry, A. (1990). Blurring the borders: Voices of African liberatory pedagogy in the United States and Canada. *Journal of Education*, 172(2), 72-88.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1992). Liberatory consequences of literacy: A case of culturally relevant instruction for African-American students.

- Lyle-Smith, E. D. (1993). *Nathaniel Clark Smith (1877-1934): African American musician, music educator and composer*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), University of North Texas, Denton, Texas.
- McAnally, E. A. (2006). Motivating urban music students. In C. Frierson-Campbell (Ed.), *Teaching music in the urban classroom: A guide to survival, success, and reform* (Vol. 1, pp. 99-108). Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Education.
- Mertens, D. M. (2005). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods*. (2nd Ed.) Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force. (2004). Assessment of diversity in America's teaching force: A call to action. Retrieved from the National Education Association 16 Apr 2008. Link: <http://www.nea.org/teacherquality/images/diversityreport.pdf>
- Nieto, S. (2003). What keeps teachers going? *Educational Leadership*, 60(8), 14-18.
- Palmer, C. M. (2011). Challenges of access to post-secondary music education programs for people of color. *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 18. Retrieved from <http://users.rider.edu/~vrme/>
- Quiocho, A., & Rios, R. (2000). The power of their presence: Minority group teachers and schooling. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(4), 485-528.
- Samuels, S. (2009). *Alfred Watkins and the Lassiter High School Band: A qualitative study*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama.
- Shields, C. (2001). Music education and mentoring as intervention for at-risk urban adolescents: Their self-perceptions, opinions, and attitudes. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 49, 273-286.
- Smith, J. (2006). The challenges of urban teaching: Young urban music educators at work. In C. Frierson-Campbell (Ed.), *Teaching music in the urban classroom: A guide to survival, success, and reform* (Vol. 1, pp. 57-74). Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Spearman, C. E. (1999). *How will societal and technological changes affect the teaching of music?* In NAFME, *Housewright symposium on the future of music*. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the Housewright Symposium on the Future of Music Education. Tallahassee, Florida.

- Stake, R. E. (2005). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 443-466). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Thomas, M. J. (2010). *Alfred L. Watkins: An historical narrative of his musical life and work with the Lassiter High School Band*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), The Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.
- U. S. Department of Education. (2008). *2007-2008 school and staffing survey (SASS)*. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/question0708.asp>
- Ware, F. (2002). Black teachers' perceptions of their professional roles and practices. In J. J. Irvine (Ed.), *In search of wholeness: African American teachers and their culturally specific classroom practices* (pp. 33-45). New York, NY: Palgrave.
- Ware, F. (2006). Warm demander pedagogy: Culturally responsive teaching that supports a culture of achievement for African American students. *Urban Education*, 41(4), 427-456.

C. Michael Palmer (cmpalmer@bsu.edu), Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Music Education at Ball State University, specializing in the teaching and learning of traditional and contemporary forms of instrumental music. His research interests include musical creativity, teacher education, social justice, popular music pedagogy, and service-learning.