

## Incorporating the Critical Music Framework: An Autoethnographic Reflection

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**ABSTRACT:** I articulate an autoethnographic narrative of using different songs to counter dominant interpretations of gender, class, immigration, slavery, and education in the secondary social studies classroom. Framing it as the Critical Music Framework, the practice of using music addressing social issues and historical representations of women and people of color provided students with reflective learning opportunities. The resulting conversations illustrate the importance of music not just on the personal but also the academic aspects of individuals.

**KEYWORDS:** music, autoethnography, social studies, social issues

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Many students find music to be a significant part of their lives. Music is a “uniquely human trait, a fundamental prosocial feature of all people in every society, and an opportunity for the involvement of individuals and communities in expressive artistic practice” (Campbell, 2018, p.5). Music also introduces the listener to a divergence of cultures. The multicultural expressions found in music, specifically through lyrics, can be harnessed by educators who want to illustrate the complexities of learning about the world (Anderson & Campbell, 2010). Using music in educational contexts such as the social studies classroom can influence how students recognized and learn from complex, multicultural worlds.

However, a disconnect exists between music and learning in social studies classrooms. Teachers tend to use mainstream songs instead of socially conscious music. For example, Billy Joel’s “We Didn’t Start the Fire” and Country Joe and the Fish’s “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag” are commonly played in classrooms when students study the Vietnam War era in the United States (Pellegrino & Lee, 2012). This approach implies that learning through music is rooted in mainstream, Eurocentric perspectives (Banks, 2019). While class and culture issues are mentioned in these two songs, they only provide a glimpse into these complicated events. When teachers have attempted to include hip-hop music, many incorporate popular songs that contain misogynistic lyrics. Other educators use

hip-hop to mask their limited understanding of social injustices or feel uncomfortable engaging in multicultural education (Campbell, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

In addressing this issue, I propose that K-12 educators and teacher educators use the *Critical Music Framework*. Through autoethnography, the *Critical Music Framework* (CMF) positions music as a learning tool against racism, genderism, and other forms of prejudice. The music included within this framework comes from female artists, artists of color, and other artists questioning societal representations of individuals and groups. The framework is historically based on my decade-long career teaching secondary social studies. Using the CMF asserts music as an affirming learning source beyond the written page. It helps students create counter-narratives as academic and personal resistance towards racist and prejudiced narratives in the social studies curricula (Ender, 2019; Hawkman & Shear, 2017).

Following the introduction, I discuss the conceptual framework of the CMF. I then illustrate the framework in the form of autoethnography. I end with concluding remarks. Insights from this article have implications for teacher educators and K-12 educators committed to establishing and maintaining critical instructional practices.

### Conceptual Framework

I used autoethnography to develop the *Critical Music Framework*. Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology rooted in self-constructed narratives (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Autoethnography challenges traditional qualitative practices rooted in objective research perspectives and results (Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2008). I create my initial narratives on “active, scientific, and systematic” views of my experiences as a secondary social studies teacher (Hughes & Pennington, 2017, p. 11). In turn, I examine those stories in connection to other groups similar to my own (i.e., teachers) or groups different from me (i.e., students) (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). The resulting chronicles open wider lenses on the educational and non-educational worlds I occupied then and now, critiquing my positionalities (Ellis et al., 2011; Spry 2001).

Autoethnography also relies on the power of memory. Boyer (2009) posits that understanding memory as a singular concept of recalling the past is impractical. Instead, a complex web of inner narratives known as memories can reveal various accounts that can have lasting influences (Boyer, 2009). This interpretation of memory is necessary because engaging in autoethnography requires the individual to consider different elements of data. Interpreting memory as data is equal to traditional qualitative research practices such as field notes and participant interviews (Winkler, 2018). Auto-ethnographers, as Giorgio (2013) explains, use memories to ground what is known and the process of examining it. And since autoethnography relies on the individual deconstructing particular experiences, memories intersect with history and context (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Music’s influence as a form of autobiographical memory is most present in secondary students’ minds, particularly from ages 13-18 (Pennebaker & Gonzales,

2009). Connecting music and autoethnography illustrates the vast possibilities music offers in changing lives (Herrmann, 2013).

Recognizing and learning music's influence reconceptualizes an individual's understanding of their involvement within particular contexts. According to Nethsinghe (2012), exploring multicultural music education through autoethnography revealed a desire to improve his teaching based on transformational learning. He also discovered admiration and trust in colleagues who challenged social injustices in their classrooms through music (Nethsinghe, 2012). Employing autoethnography uncovers particular identities rooted in music that may be initially understood as conflicting (Herrmann, 2013). In particular, Herrmann (2013) discovered a connection between his Christian upbringing and his post-punk music involvement. These divergent narratives based on music through autoethnography trouble the notion of historical knowledge as linear or absolute (Starr, 2010).

As a result, research suggests that music is a useful pedagogical tool in analyzing past events, current events, and civics in social studies classrooms (Mangram & Weber, 2012; Moore, 2007; Pellegrino & Lee, 2012; White, 2016). However, the consideration given to songs such as the ones mentioned above in the introduction of this article, while ignoring socially conscious songs, reflects the racial divisions found in education (Levy & Byrd, 2011; Paul, 2000). Music provides our students and educators with cultural cues; these cues help them make sense of their worlds (Campbell, 2018). Because educational contexts and curricula do not operate in isolated spaces, learning through music gives students numerous opportunities to reconcile their personal experiences with their communal histories (Campbell, 2018; Ross et al., 2015). Music represents a significant learning opportunity for our growing diverse student populations (Campbell, 2018).

Autoethnography also disputes knowledge (DeLeon, 2010). It challenges an individual's experiences, helping that person understand their complex identities and thoughts (Ellis et al., 2011). This challenge leads to potential growth, primarily when relying on music to redefine relationships (Bartleet, 2009). New interpretations of relationships encourage the person to continue towards socially conscious awareness (Bartleet, 2009). With the *Critical Music Framework*, students rationalize their worlds while emphasizing challenging racism and other prejudices.

Thus, the *Critical Music Framework* has the potential for students and teachers to collaboratively contest problematic historical representations of communities and people of color. In the following section, I describe my experiences applying this framework in teaching social studies to secondary students. The autoethnography is based on reflections from my involvement in education. All names mentioned within the autoethnography are pseudonyms.

### **The Critical Music Framework: An Autoethnographic Experience**

I always think about the thousands of secondary education students I taught from 2004 to 2014. Considering the misinformation era, social media, and continued social and political divisions, I think about the music that speaks to them. I understand that they may continue to have certain stereotypes about particular music genres (Levy & Byrd, 2011). However, I hope the songs that I played in our social studies classes encouraged them to listen to unfamiliar songs, artists, and genres while learning the complexities of analyzing their experiences (Regelski, 2005).

Engaging in autoethnographic work requires a positionality statement for the reader. This is necessary because I am challenging power and privilege through an interrogation of my identities, epistemologies, and ontologies (Ender, 2019). I am a multi-ethnic male, with an Indigenous Latin American mother and a European father. I attended a liberal arts university and earned advanced degrees in the field of Education, culminating with a Ph.D. I worked as a social studies teacher for a decade in different educational contexts. Currently, I train individuals desiring to become social studies educators. I think about the different things I have done to change the way students learn. The works of Freire (2019) and hooks (1994) have continuously pushed me to resist majoritarian themes in education. Furthermore, I have to thank my 10th grade U.S. History teacher for instilling music as part of that resistance in me.

#### **Music and My Youth**

I recall the album cover of the Buddhist monk self-immolating during a protest in Vietnam in the early 1960s. Mr. Franco held it up as he played "Take the Power Back" (Commerford et al., 1992) by Rage Against the Machine. Rage Against the Machine (RATM) consisted of four musicians who centered social activism within their lyrics. Mr. Franco taught the honors history class, filled with racially and ethnically diverse students. He used the song to gauge the students' understanding of race and culture in the U.S. before introducing the OJ Simpson murder trial. I recall Mr. Franco taking the cassette out of the plastic case and inserting it into a 1980s model boombox. When the song started playing, with the opening lyrics, "Bring that shit in!" I heard a collective "Whoa!"

At the start of the song, the singer, Zach de la Rocha, positions schools as institutions replicating dominant ideas:

In the right light, study becomes insight

But the system that dissed us, teaches us to read and write

So-called facts are fraud

They want us to allege and pledge and bow down to their god

In the second verse, de la Rocha views the curriculum as being exclusionary, marginalizing non-Europeans:

The present curriculum, I put my fist in 'em  
Eurocentric, every last one of 'em  
See right through the red, white, and blue disguise  
With lecture I puncture the structure of lies

In the third verse, de la Rocha imagines a teacher in the act of conditioning his students into believing dominant narratives:

The teacher stands in front of the class  
But the lesson plan he can't recall  
The students' eyes don't perceive the lies  
Bouncing off every fucking wall"

The song ends with the repeating verse: "No more lies."

The song pushed the class to consider the different ways teachers replicate dominant ideas and practices. I understood the lyrics in this song as a rebuff towards this form of education (Wandersee, 2015). The Cuban American students rejected the song, accusing the band of being anti-American and anti-education. The African American and Muslim students supported the band, citing the First Amendment and the disparities of opportunities for people of color. I recall being initially stunned by the song's playing since I had not heard music played in a classroom setting. Let alone, RATM!

It marked a period of significant transformation. I listened to pop music during this time, lyrics referring to teenage love and heartbreak. I never considered music that addressed the experiences of first-generation students, such as myself in high school. What "Take the Power Back" did was redirect my gaze. The lyrics encouraged me to review society's cultural representations, such as film, literary works, and television, through critical lenses (Wandersee, 2015). Instead of digesting the outputs from these representations as fact, I began to understand how these different mediums worked together to maintain order (Kellner & Share, 2007). In retrospect, that particular 10th-grade experience changed the course of my life. I started reading Howard Zinn, James Joyce, Frantz Fanon, and James Baldwin. If I had to pinpoint the moment I wanted to teach, it was that day. Moreover, it was the foundational experience for the development of the *Critical Music Framework*.

### **Music and the Youth**

I see music as the gatekeeper into the minds of my students. I think about the past year, 2019. 2019 was the first year one song, "Old Town Road" by Lil Nas X, attained over 100 million online streams in a seven-day period (Trust, 2019). Youth have access to music through mobile technologies such as mobile phones, tablets, and laptops. I think of my generation. During the compact disc era

(generally between 1986-2006), adolescents averaged over ten hours of music consumption per week (Laughey, 2006). I owned over 300 compact discs in 1996. Going back further to the World War II era, researchers considered music an essential component in youth's educational and psychological development due to its popularity (Seashore, 1940). Safe to say, music is relevant.

I taught at one secondary school that was racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. A significant group in one of my social studies classes, maybe 10 out of 25 students, represented the French-speaking countries of West Africa: Senegal, Togo, and Cote d'Ivoire. During a unit on slavery, I thought I had provided critical spaces and learning opportunities: Reading accounts written by enslaved individuals and using lesson plan materials from the International Slavery Museum. However, during the end of the unit assessment, one student, Jean-Pierre, asked a question. "Why don't you play any music that talks about Africa today?" I told him I did not know any songs. He looked down and walked away. The next day, Jean-Pierre entered my class before the first period and handed me a CD. The CD contained a handwritten list of different artists and songs. As I played the CD, I recognized the voices on "Land of Promise." It was a collaboration between hip-hop artist Nas and reggae artist Damian "Jr. Gong" Marley.

Released in 2010, "Land of Promise" (Jones et al., 2010). focuses on poverty, wealth, and race. The first verse juxtapositions U.S. cities on Africa:

Imagine Ghana like California with Sunset Boulevard  
Johannesburg would be Miami  
Somalia like New York

The verse continues to name other U.S. locales such as Atlanta, Chicago, and Busch Gardens in Florida. The second verse positions Western material possessions within African and other Black-majority settings:

Promise land I picture Porsches  
Basquiat portraits  
Pinky Rings realistic princesses  
Heiresses bunch a Kings and Queens  
Plus I picture fortunes for kids out in Port-Au-Prince

The song concludes with a sample of reggae artist Dennis Brown singing the following words:

There is plenty of land for you and I  
Buy and buy  
Lots of food to share for everyone  
No time for segregation

I played this song before I went over the results of the unit assessment. One student, Joseph, saw the collaboration of two distinct Black artists on an album as a forum on race relations in the Western Hemisphere. The collaboration between a U.S. hip-hop artist (Nas) and a Jamaican reggae artist (Jr. Gong) represents a union not commonly found in music. He reminded us that we were fresh from the inauguration of Barack Obama as the first African American U.S. president. Examining the backgrounds of both artists (Nas raised in public housing in Queens, NY; Marley raised in Kingston, Jamaica, the son of reggae artist Bob Marley), Joseph then said that their willingness to deconstruct their experiences through a back-and-forth interplay created narratives worthy of study in our social studies class. According to Childs (2015), socio-historical descriptions of African Americans in social studies ignore positive contributions. Thus, students experience dominant narratives when learning about slavery, such as glorifying the actions of individuals like Abraham Lincoln or limiting the geographical focus to the United States (King et al., 2012).

I also shared out my learning. I shared with the class that Jean-Pierre taught me something new: The lyrics epitomize Africa as a significant part of our world today. Immediately, Jean-Pierre and his friends started cheering. Nas and Jr. Gong consider African countries and cities equal to U.S. cities and states. These reimaginings push students to challenge long-held deficit views of Africa. King and Brown (2014) argue that the decades-long marginalization of study and analysis of Africa and the African Diaspora forces students to be ignorant of African knowledge. Because of the Pan-African sentiment in the song, the lyrics position African advancements as relevant, non-deficit understandings of African culture.

The lyrics on Africa also conjure up images of paradise for the listener. Jean-Pierre felt that the lyrics to “Land of Promise” reflected his particular life experiences as a teenager living in the United States and recalling life as a child in Senegal (Kellner, 2003). The conversations continued the next day, with Jean-Pierre’s friends bringing in additional CDs. We spent the next day listening to music for the entire class period. I saw how songs that are sung in English, French, and different African languages created excitement and conversations among the students.

### **Music as a Response**

I remember the first time I heard “Merry Go’ Round” by Kacey Musgraves (2012). I was teaching at a different secondary school. I remember the upbeat start to the song, with a banjo, keyboards, and guitar playing. I then heard the lyrics:

If you ain’t got two kids by 21

You’re probably gonna die alone

At least that what’s tradition told you

The song then transitions to her family. The pre-chorus positions her immediate family members as individuals susceptible to unemployment, drug abuse, and gender inequality:

Mama's hooked on Mary Kay  
Brother's hooked on Mary Jane  
And Daddy's hooked on Mary two doors down

Then, the song brings back addiction and gender inequality as significant social problems using a nursery rhyme format:

Jack and Jill went up the hill  
Jack burned out on booze and pills  
And Mary had a little lamb  
Mary just don't give a damn no more

The student who introduced me to this song, Georgia, loved country music. The song influenced how she learned social studies in my class (Storey, 2012). Because I always had music playing when they entered my room for class, she always asked me why I never played country music. I told her that I did not care for it. I was wary about playing a genre where whiteness was associated with the genre (Banks, 2019). I relented when she told me that this song was very different from other country songs. Since I had established a collaborative atmosphere in our class and we were learning about local history, she saw this song as an educational opportunity for me and her peers (Regelski, 2005). She lent me her CD copy of the Musgraves' album.

Listening to this song challenged my initial views on country music. I saw country music as a white-dominated music genre, the lyrics describing experiences polar opposite of mine. Growing up on hip-hop and punk, I saw no space for country music. However, I understood why one student wanted to show me how country music was willing to address social issues. I realized that this song would be valuable in drawing in those students who would visibly groan whenever I played a song by Public Enemy or the Clash. Since we were learning about the Great Migration, it was appropriate to learn with this song.

The students and I examined the history of country music. Pellegrino and Lee (2012) argue that African instruments, such as the banjo, contributed to bluegrass and country development. We explored the historical connections between African music and North American music, thus placing African and African Americans' cultural strengths at the center of our focus. The students, especially the reluctant ones, began to question in conversations why they had not learned about this in previous classes. I didn't answer their questions since I could not speak to their prior learning experiences. Instead, I said that they now had an opportunity to learn something different.

I noticed how "Merry Go' Round" struck a chord with students from different racial and ethnic groups. Since the song addresses social issues in suburban and urban settings, nearly all of the students were familiar with a family member depicted in the song. The concept of selling goods from home, such as Mary Kay cosmetics, was a common employment opportunity within the school district. Many students shared out how their mothers and fathers sold Mary Kay to make extra

money. Some of the African American and Latinx students asked why Mary Kay was common in the area. Georgia responded that her father had lost his manufacturing job, causing her mother to work as a Mary Kay consultant for financial support. The confusion on the students' faces was a transition to analyze the inequalities resulting from accumulating wealth. We talked about why it appeared that only white parents sold Mary Kay.

Two things happened. First, the students started acknowledging the socio-economic divides in their neighborhoods in their written reflections. They began talking about the different neighborhoods they visited and avoided. We then tied those reflections to the economic practice of redlining that developed after African Americans settled in cities such as Chicago and Baltimore in the 1930s. Second, the students started learning about hidden communities existing in plain sight. One of those communities was the Latinx community.

One of my Latinx students, Carolina, came to the United States with her family from Venezuela when she was a toddler. Her family left Venezuela when Hugo Chavez assumed power as president. She sat quietly for most of the year. However, one day when I had lunch duty approximately two weeks after listening to "Merry Go Round," she asked me if she could play a song for the class to hear. I asked her which song and she responded with "1977" by Ana Tijoux (2010). I told her that I was unfamiliar with it; her response was, "That's why I want to play it." I looked up the song on a video streaming platform and I listened to it. The next day, I told Carolina that I would play the song when discussing post World War II immigration in the United States.

The song is a Hip-Hop song sung in Spanish. The words depict the experiences of a child growing up in exile. The song begins with reference to a specific year:

Mil novecientos setenta y shh...

Translated into English, the words say, "Nineteen seventy sh..." Tijoux acknowledges her birthday in the first line of the song: Naci un día de Junio del año 77 (I was born one June day in the 77th year). In the final verse, she remarks on her return to her homeland to witness the fall of a military dictatorship.

En la cordillera que miraba la salida\

La parada militar de paso monótono, colores policromos, los  
uniformes de poco tono

The lyrics are translated into English: "In the mountain range that I watched the exit, the military stop of monotonous step, polychrome colors, the uniforms of little tone." In between the two verses, she documents growing up in exile:

Correcto, incorrecto, se aprende todo al respecto

Saber que algunas personas quieren el daño

Subir peldaño toma tiempo, toma año

In English, “Right, wrong, you learn everything about it/knowing that some people want to damage/climbing steps takes time, takes years.” While the rest of the lyrics illustrate personal experiences, “1977” provides listeners with underutilized narratives on living elsewhere.

As I listened to “1977,” I understood why Carolina connected with it. The song was deeply personal for her (Storey, 2012). “1977” spoke to her in ways the curriculum failed to do so, and she wanted to share those experiences with her classmates (Pulido, 2009). The lyrics illustrate the emotional experiences of a child in exile. The lyrics also symbolize the struggles of living in a setting that is culturally and socially different. “1977” helped Carolina understand the different cultures she encountered daily: Venezuelan culture at home and American culture outside the home (Campbell, 2018). Carolina saw a learning opportunity for classmates who held opposing views on immigration.

The majority of the native-born students held nativist views, positioning immigrants as economic opportunists taking jobs away from Americans. I remember them complaining out-loud that the song was sung only in Spanish, and I did not provide them with lyrical translations. However, when I played the song two more times and asked them to consider someone else’s point of view, their complaints ceased. First-generation and non-native born students started contributing to the class discussions, sharing a variety of immigration narratives. Some native-born students began to question their beliefs. Comments such as “I never knew about this” and “That is different from what my parents have been telling me” were shared. The song had caused students to challenge their prejudices and thoughts on immigration (McCarron, 1993).

By the time the unit ended, a division had developed among the native-born students. Some students discussed the need for stronger immigration laws, while others commented that their immigration views changed. A couple of students shared how conversations on immigration played out at home. For Carolina, she became a vocal representation of the immigrant experience in subsequent units.

Playing “1977” in my class represented a unique learning opportunity for students to reconsider dominant immigration narratives. Carolina’s vulnerability in discussing her experiences moving to the United States as a political refugee provided elements of reality not commonly articulated by the social studies curriculum or associated textbooks (Ross et al., 2015). Carolina’s desire to provide a different perspective on immigration pushed some of her classmates to critically reflect on their thoughts (Freire, 1974/2005; Smyth, 1989).

### Discussions

The *Critical Music Framework* is rooted in the philosophies of Paulo Freire and bell hooks. The framework transforms the social studies classroom into a multicultural setting where music anchors the learning (hooks, 1994). The

framework works to redirect learning away from the “banking method” and more towards equitable interactions between educators and students (Freire, 2019). The framework encourages critical thinking, extracting students from the normalized, isolating learning settings they experience daily (Freire, 2019). The flexibility of the CMF allows students to become part of the curriculum (Freire, 2019). They start to examine and challenge political and social issues in a democratic setting that benefits all students and teachers (hooks, 1994).

Students and educators engaging with the CMF engage with the following practices: Critical consciousness, self-reflection, vulnerability, and the continued application of music as learning. Critical consciousness encourages the individual to question the worlds around them to reclaim ownership of their knowledge (Freire, 1974/2005). Reclaiming ownership includes the unmasking of power dynamics and hierarchies used by education to maintain order (Freire, 1974/2005). Some social studies teachers choose to suppress critical thought and conversations (Hawkman & Shear, 2020). Pushing students to engage in critical consciousness establishes a community in the classroom; student experiences, voices, and future outlooks are valued (hooks, 1994).

Students also begin to understand how socially constructed settings such as schools and classrooms influence their learning and views of the world (Regelski, 2005). Critical consciousness amplifies these views, pushing them to re-examine them. Students can rely on particular lyrics and music to decipher those particular experiences (Kellner, 2003). They become experts on cultural and social issues, thus resisting dominant themes and ideologies found in social studies aimed at maintaining divisions (Regelski, 2005). The next step in the framework is self-reflection.

Self-reflection propels students, teachers, and teacher educators to deconstruct cultural and historical interpretations and power dynamics within educational contexts. This is particularly necessary when students have been taught by teachers who accept the social studies curriculum as truth, refuse to deviate from it, and begin to unmask themselves (Smyth, 1989). Self-reflection emphasizes student voices and the particular languages they use daily (Fernandez-Balboa, 1998). The results from self-reflections often bring elements of vulnerability into the learning setting.

Vulnerability opens new avenues for conversations. When acknowledged and supported by the teacher, trusting relationships between themselves and the teacher begin to develop (Berry, 2010). The classroom becomes a community-engaged setting, where issues-centered dialogue starts (Berry, 2010; hooks, 1994). Students become power brokers, sharing their intellectual capabilities as self-affirming practices (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). When music becomes part of the self-reflection, students start to see connections between the music and their worldly interpretations. Music also reaffirms their vulnerability, considering that musicians demonstrate their vulnerabilities through the songs they create.

With the CMF, students and teachers can expand music’s reach by analyzing the lyrical commentary on contemporary issues in the songs and

drawing connections to historical events consistently. This practice deviates from the norm of teaching social studies out of textbooks or directly from the curriculum (Maloy & LaRoche, 2015). The political battles over the construction and delivery of the curricula have rendered the use of music as non-essential, in favor of standardized practices of teaching to the standardized test such as textbook-based learning and knowledge dissemination through worksheets (Maloy & LaRoche, 2015; Ross et al., 2015; White & McCormack, 2006). For students, especially students of color, dealing with different social, cultural, and economic issues daily, listening to songs included within the CMF could alter their future experiences for the good of their respective communities.

### Conclusion

Music is important. By implementing the critical music framework as a shared learning occurrence in my classes, students felt more compelled to share their thoughts and experiences. Social studies was no longer a school subject dependent on learning facts, figures, and individuals. Instead, students shared out painful experiences about racism, gender, and class discrimination. Students challenged their peers on immigration views. Moreover, in the particular cases of Georgia and Jean-Pierre, students sought to enrich my lessons through their personal experiences. Sharing out my vulnerabilities through teaching social studies encouraged them, and other students not mentioned in this autoethnography, to engage in critical discussions.

The *Critical Music Framework* also pushed my students to consider different perspectives on gender, race, immigration, and class not offered by the curricula I taught. In particular, I recall a visit to a local supermarket years after I first played “Merry Go Round” and “1977.” I did not initially recognize the cashier as a former student of mine. As he scanned my items and exchanged pleasantries, he mentioned how the music I played changed his life completely. He had become “a critical thinker, thanks to the music Mr. Ender played.” I told him that he allowed himself to think for himself through music. Last I heard, he was working on his master’s degree in education.

Finally, music represents a form of social studies. Social studies is one discipline in the K-12 setting that prepares students to be lifelong inquirers and civic participants. The artists I played in my social studies classes addressed social and political issues in their lyrics. For many of our current students, music is their only news source or commentary on social issues, current events, or historical events. As teacher educators, we must show future educators and in-service educators the power of music as learning.

I encourage you to reflect on the music that has inspired you. In particular, reflect on the songs that made you reconsider a social issue or reconceptualized your views on particular groups of people. Then use those reflections to guide your teaching. You will start to see more students interact with you. You will understand how music empowers the learners in your class, especially those previously silenced.

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