

Cultural Empowerment and Antiracism Education through Ethno-Musicology: A Curricular Intervention for “Newcomer” Classes

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I. INTRODUCTION

Researchers and practitioners in Canadian immigration are currently calling for an emphasis on migrants’ social and cultural integration as a necessary counterpart to socio-economic integration (P2P.ca). And since schools are recognized as “arenas of acculturation” for immigrant and refugee youth (Knight et al. 2012), they are frequently used as centres for youth settlement and social/cultural integration. In Edmonton, Alberta, a number of NGOs have been delivering programs (including in-class curricula, homework clubs, culture clubs, one-on-one mentorships, and after-school programs) in order to address this need. However, few if any seem to address students’ issues of social and cultural integration in a critical way. Meanwhile, schools’ well-meaning multicultural celebrations and culture-specific clubs often portray ethno-cultural groups as monolithic, static entities or emphasize insurmountable cultural differences. This can reinforce students’ cultural stereotypes and heighten social alienation and cultural segregation within schools, particularly among immigrants and refugees.

As a Lebanese immigrant myself, I was curious as to how one might address these social/cultural integration issues using research tools and insights from the field of ethno-musicology (a.k.a. anthropology of music). Of course, music has long been recognized as a powerful contributor to overall wellbeing because it is “engaging, distracting, physical, ambiguous, communicative, social, and it affects behaviors and identities” (MacDonald et al. 2012, 1-10). Meanwhile, cultural anthropology is now being recognized as an essential part of high school education, particularly in order to teach tolerance within culturally diverse schools (Appell-Warren 2015). However, there remains a serious gap in the research and practice of ethno-musicology within schools, much less as a tool in immigrant/refugee cultural empowerment and antiracism education.

II. OBJECTIVES

With the support of an immigrant-serving organization and two junior high schools in Edmonton, I set about investigating the following research question: “How can ethno-musicological tools help schools to validate *all* migrant students’ cultural knowledges while decreasing their social isolation and promoting intercultural dialogue and friendship?” Through a collaborative approach to curriculum development, pedagogy, and evaluation, I was able to develop and test an ethno-musicology curriculum with immigrant/refugee students in two junior high “newcomer” classes in Edmonton. The following sections provide a comparative overview of the process, as well as its major outcomes and challenges.

Below are a set of video stills from my curricular intervention at School B:

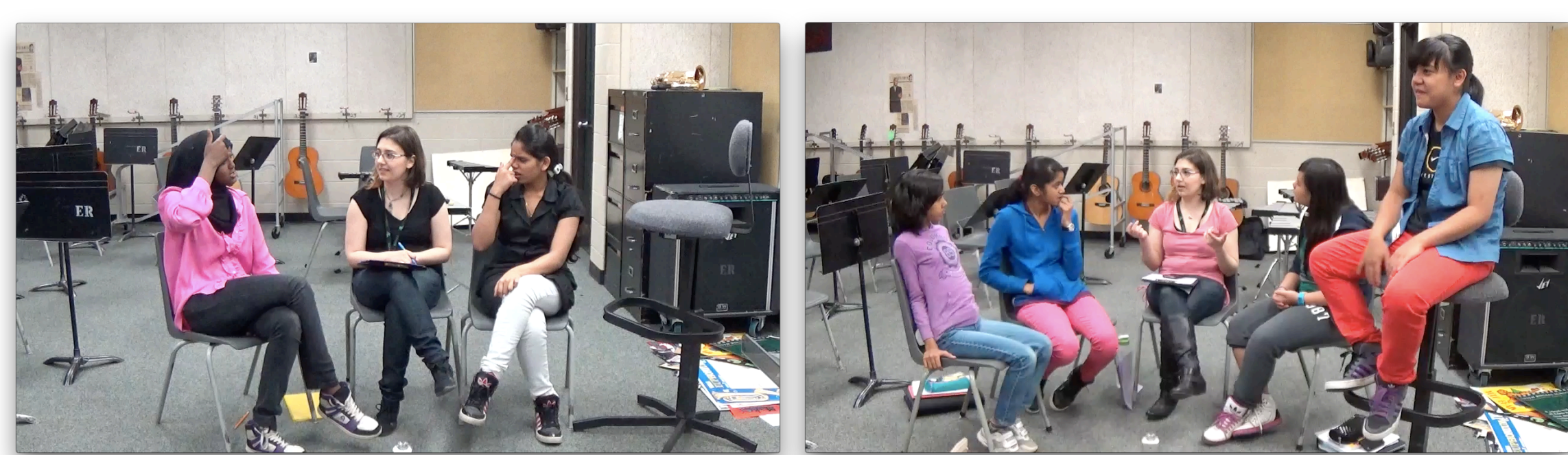


Figure 1. Students conducting reciprocal musico-cultural interviews with their peers, with the occasional mediation of the author



Figure 2. Students playing Indian tabla and West African djembe (left) and teaching each other Bollywood dance moves (right)

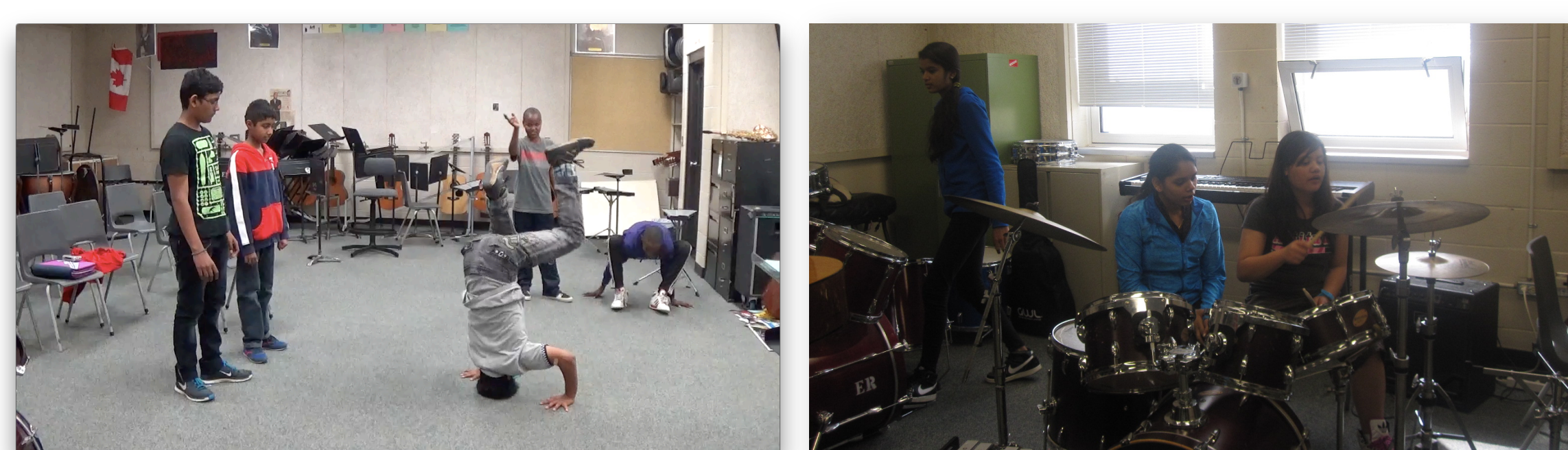


Figure 3. Students trying different break-dancing moves (left), and student teaching her classmate how to play the drum set (right)

III. METHODS

My research methodology comprised five main stages:

1. **Participant-observation** within “newcomer” classes and school-wide events
2. **Consultations** with stakeholders (students, parents, school staff)
3. **Collaborative curriculum planning** with teachers and/or students
4. Facilitation of **curricular intervention sessions**
5. **Process evaluation** through interviews and focus groups with stakeholders (students, parents, school staff)

Since my priority was to tailor the curriculum to each “newcomer” class’s specific needs, the curricular intervention ended up having a different focus at each school. The table below provides an overview of this custom design process:

	SCHOOL A	SCHOOL B
CLASS TRAITS	Literacy class in a faith-based school Economically underprivileged refugee students of various cultures	English Language Learning (ELL) class in a public school Students of diverse economic situations and migrant statuses; Gujarati Indian immigrant majority with few students of other backgrounds
ISSUES	Low self-confidence Culture shock, alienation, “newcomer” social stigmatization Reversed parent-child roles and intergenerational conflict Identity crisis and rejection of home culture	Linguistic-cultural segregation Cultural stereotypes, hyper-awareness of racial difference Indian majority’s lack of interest in other cultures Cultural minorities’ isolation and low self-esteem
CURRICULAR OBJECTIVES	Increasing self-confidence and cultural pride Improving family relationships Improving intercultural peer relationships	Increasing interest in and respect for other cultures Improving intercultural teaching, learning, and dialogue skills Improving intercultural peer relationships
FOCUS	Family-based cultural empowerment	Peer-based intercultural dialogue
CURRICULAR COMPONENTS	Class discussions about music and migration Training in basic research and interview methods Student-led musico-cultural interviews with parents Semi-public research presentations and performances	Participatory research activities and in-class dialogue Student-led musico-cultural interviews with peers Peer teaching and learning of music and dance Public research presentations and performances

IV. RESULTS

Each curricular intervention posed a unique set of challenges and yielded a variety of outcomes, which may be summarized as such:

	SCHOOL A	SCHOOL B
CHALLENGES	School access restrictions Difficulty recruiting parents Curricular time constraints Student and parent language barrier Some parents’ religious issues with music	Wavering student commitment Classroom management issues Conflict among students and their friends Resistance to cultural desegregation Some parents’ religious issues with music
OUTCOMES	Critical thinking about culture and bi-cultural identity Increased cultural pride and self-confidence Bonding with and increased respect towards parents Bonding with classmates based on shared experience of migration Student and parent validation by the school	Critical thinking about cultural stereotypes and bi-cultural identity Enhanced intercultural dialogue skills Increased appreciation for students of other cultures Bonding with classmates through collective performance Empowerment of previously marginalized students

V. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the challenges that such a curriculum may pose, my preliminary results suggest that using an ethno-musicology approach within multicultural migrant classrooms can be advantageous for a number of reasons:

- a. It can **adapt to all subject-positions** within a classroom instead of catering to one linguistic-cultural group at a time.
- b. It can actively involve students in **critical thinking and inquiry** about their classmates’ fluid musico-cultural identities as well as their own.
- c. It can help to reinforce the **migrant parent’s position** as a valuable source of knowledge for their child and school.
- d. Its focus on music and dance performance is capable of **overcoming** language **barriers**, disengagement in the learning process, cultural-linguistic segregation, and students’ *verbal* tiptoeing around culture and race.
- e. It establishes **migrant students as “cultural ambassadors,”** with all the value and social responsibility that this title entails in a culturally diverse school and society.
- f. It can **facilitate social bonding** among students and within families.
- g. It is capable of negotiating and subverting power relations among cultural minorities and majorities, thereby **modelling more democratic social relations**.



Figure 4. The author posing for a picture with School B project participants during their public performance night (June 2014)

VI. REFERENCES

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As a PhD candidate in Ethno-musicology, I am currently writing my doctoral dissertation from Toronto. Beyond this program, I plan to continue working with migrant youth and families. Specifically, I am interested in utilizing my ethno-musicological and cross-cultural communication skills in order to research, develop, and evaluate antiracism school policies and social integration programs for immigrant and refugee families across Canada.

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