



The Love Curriculum: A Personal Reflection of Learning through BTS

ACADEMIC ARTICLE: ESSAY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a result of an assignment titled “The Love Curriculum.” In this assignment, we were tasked with finding ways to connect a hobby or interest with curriculum, thus discovering how our interests could be presented within a classroom environment. However, the assignment also called for us to interpret our love curriculum through our personal experiences, leading me to write about what I have learned as a fan of BTS. I found that my new acquired learning was not linked solely to their music, but also in what they stood for and represented from my point of view. I was able to discern how learning styles, student interest, and musical/visual supplements played a role in my education, while also discovering how social reconstructionism and the hidden curriculum created a connection between BTS and myself as an African American woman that I would have failed to recognize on my own. Through this assignment, I reaffirmed the importance of finding new ways to connect with my students through their interests and learning styles in presenting curriculum content. And I remain hopeful that by tapping into topics of interest and relevance in my students’ lives, I can guide them towards the discovery of their own love curriculum.

KEYWORDS

BTS, curriculum, music, Social Reconstructionism, K-pop, African American, early childhood, kindergarten, teacher, student interest, learning styles

As a child, I can remember listening to music to drown out the realities of my home life, seeking refuge in the notes and melodies of the songs I fell in love with. I would write out the lyrics and use them as a form of meditation, allowing the words to permeate my soul as I visualized myself performing in front of an audience. After many years of Walkmans, portable CD players, stereo systems, and countless headphones, my love for music has continued to flourish. Currently, I have become engulfed in foreign music, specifically the music of a group known as BTS. They sing primarily in Korean, which has led me to dig deeper into their lyrics (which I loved doing as a child) through translations to discern their message. What I found in their lyrics was quite surprising and not in the least bit what I was expecting from a boyband. The messages presented in their music are inspiring, to say the least. From discussing the oppression of societal standards and capitalism in South Korea to urging their fans to find ways to love themselves, BTS helped deepen my understanding of music and its universality.

On a deeper level, I was able to make a connection between my love for BTS and their music with my practice as an early childhood educator and with curriculum. It is not often that a personal interest has breached the walls of my career, but through the guise of an assignment presented by my professor, I was able to find a connection between the two. This connection has shown me the importance of including student interests and learning styles within the curriculum to further deepen the contextual understanding of presented content within the classroom. It has also given me the confidence I needed as an educator to incorporate student interests and learning styles within my own professional practice. By observing and analyzing BTS and meshing my love for them with curriculum, I made connections in my personal life and identified a hidden curriculum and social justice issues as they pertain to me as an African American female. In the past, I chose not to address these issues, but now feel a little more confident in acknowledging them through the discovery of my love curriculum, even if the acknowledgment is only to myself. Consequently, in this paper I will focus on the importance of connecting curriculum, learning styles, and student interests as they relate to students gaining a deeper understanding of curricular content in the classroom and discuss how an analysis of my interests led to the discovery of a deeper connection between myself as an African American woman and BTS, culminating with the creation of my love curriculum.

Learning Styles

One of my more obvious attributes in terms of learning styles is that I am an auditory learner. Listening without fully having to pay attention to my surroundings is a trait that I have developed over the years. As a result, I can listen to music and the TV while completing activities and still understand what is happening around me. This trait also helped me when I began listening to BTS's music. One of the first songs I heard was "Singularity," an intro on *Love Yourself: Tear*, their number one album on the Billboard 200 chart in 2018. I was shocked by the musical genre of the song as it reminded me of the type of R&B music I listened to as a young adult, specifically along the lines of D'Angelo. I could hear the lyrics and vocals but was not at all bothered that I did not understand the words because my focus was on the actual music and its rhythmic undertones. My learning style shone through as I relished the musical elements of "Singularity" without knowing the lyrical content. I was able to fully enjoy my newfound exposure to BTS, appreciating the music for what it had to offer and the nostalgic feelings it brought to light. Later, I turned my attention to lyrical interpretation, leading me to watch their music videos to fully comprehend the

message BTS was putting forth into the universe. At this point, I was fully engaged as my visual and kinesthetic learning styles were activated due to impactful images and mesmerizing choreography.

Musical/Visual Supplement

This engagement with my learning styles reminded me of Bruner (1966) and his use of games and activities within his teaching practices as a strategy to help students understand the larger concept of man. Bruner (1966) states, “So while each domain can be treated as a separate set of ideas, as we shall see, success in teaching depends upon making it possible for children to have a sense of their interaction.” Incorporating music in lessons can *enhance* that understanding. Lems (2018) highlights music as a motivating factor in gaining student attention, creating a classroom atmosphere ripe for new learning. Thus, “Singularity” (motivating factor) captured my attention and not only led me towards new learning related to BTS but also allowed me to deepen my sense of interaction as my experiences as a fan of BTS expanded. The inclusion of English in their music as well as the vivid imagery used in their videos allowed me as a foreigner to derive meaning and form relatable context in terms of my own experiences. Just as Bruner used games and activities to help students *make sense* of his teaching, imagery helped me make sense of the deeper meaning behind the lyrics.

Specifically, the video for “Fake Love” (Choi, 2018) assured me that there was a lot more to it than just the booming bass line. The images from that video painted a dramatic picture of agony and despair about self-love and addictions. However, I found it to be so much more as it references Jungian psychology and its four archetypes (the Ego, the Persona, the Shadow, and the Anima/Animus), specifically the persona at this particular moment. In the video, RM, a member of BTS, stands in front of a mirror dressed as an idol, reaching out towards a reflection of himself wearing “regular” clothes and a “regular” hairstyle, indicating that he views himself differently from how the world views him. For the world he appears as RM, his stage persona; in reality he is simply a regular person. There is a hint of sadness as he walks through the mirror, the two reflections merging as one. The persona represents a mask that we wear for the outside world to see, hiding the “real” us known as the shadow (Stein, Cruz, & Buser, 2019), which BTS portrays perfectly through the visuals in “Fake Love.” I would never have made the same connections through translating the lyrics alone, which speak simply of being sad and disappointed in oneself. The imagery from the video helped me to realize that I also wear a mask, hiding my true persona from the public eye to fit a “good girl” narrative placed upon me all my life. The “Fake Love” MV helped me to make sense of the meaning behind the lyrics through imagery in a way I never thought possible, supplementing my experiences as a new learner in the world of BTS while also touching my different learning styles.

Student Interests

Personally, I have always been interested in Asian culture through food and anime, a Japanese style of animation, so it was only a matter of time before I expanded into the realm of music due to my deep appreciation for it. The ending music in animes would always catch my attention and I started picking up lyrics that were predominately in Japanese, sometimes Korean. The song at the end of episodes of an anime called *Blue Exorcist* is what led me towards the musical side of Asian culture. Although other songs piqued my interest, I searched for this one on YouTube to find the artists. Scanning the comments, I found the group’s name (2PM), and after I watched a few of their music

videos, the algorithm suggested BTS. The door had been opened as one interest led to another. Dewey (1929), through his Pedagogic Creed, points out the importance of allowing students' interests to prevail in school. The possibility of including student interests and popular and changing topics through content modification within the classroom can lead to an expansion in learning various subject matter as well as promoting identity and value building through different classroom subcultures (Astleitner, 2018). Starting with one subject, as in my case anime, eventually led me to discover BTS. The same could be said for our students as we guide them towards lifelong learning by simply opening the door to something they find interesting.

Social Reconstructionism

Another surprise waiting for me in BTS's discography was the number of songs that exposed social issues and perceived injustices within Korean society. For example, the song "Baepsae" details the issues faced by millennials as they struggle to maintain the economic expectations of the older generation (DKDKTV, 2018). Through music, BTS continues to defy societal expectations and live for themselves. Several songs echo this sentiment: "No More Dream" (debut song), "Paradise," "Not Today," and "Spine Breaker" all carry the message of change and urge listeners to forge their own path ahead. Eisner (1985) states that social reconstructionism "is basically aimed at developing levels of critical consciousness among children and youth so that they become aware of the kinds of ills that the society has and become motivated to learn how to alleviate them." This quote hits home as it reflects what BTS has done through their music. As an African American, the issues of racism faced by people of color in America are constantly on my mind. "Fight the Power" (Public Enemy), "Freedom" (Beyoncé), and "Strange Fruit" (sung by Billie Holliday) are songs that bear specific meaning to me as a Black American because the lyrics speak to the experiences of my people in relation to the injustices imposed upon us by the majority. Although the message BTS puts forth is different and our experiences are far from being the same, I can relate to fighting injustice and the need for change in a standardized society in which you do not fit. Their music brought to light the universality of "the fight" across cultures, as fighting oppression has no borders. Current events such as the Black Lives Matter protests in response to the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of law enforcement paint a vivid picture of young people standing on the front lines to combat centuries-old systemic policies aimed at marginalized populations. Young people are more than motivated and are poised to change the world as we know it.

Hidden Curriculum

A final thought in terms of my experiences as an older, African American fan of BTS lies in the hidden aspects of the stereotype of those who can and cannot enjoy their music. I have been told that I am too old and have received strange looks from friends and family members because "Black people do not listen to K-Pop." I no longer express my love of BTS to others unless necessary; those who truly know me view my interests without judgement. Yet I am proud of being a part of the BTS ARMY and will continue to support them, although I am still working on doing so loudly. Because what I have seen BTS go through over the past two years of being immersed in their music is heartbreaking. They have been called girls because they wear make-up for performances, endured racial slurs and hate even from their own people, and have been ignored by the Western music industry because they sing in Korean, all while accomplishing the most impossible feats. As Moroye (2009) points out, the hidden

curriculum has an ominous and negative connotation attached to it as it refers to “the processes of schooling that were not explicitly taught but were required for success.” BTS has experienced this negativity because they do not exhibit the typical male stereotype of stark masculinity in the music industry and have refused to cave to those who advise them to sing in English. They have conquered that aspect of the hidden requirements of a boyband in Western society, garnering unprecedented success and remaining true to their cultural identity. I have rebelled against the hidden curriculum as well because I am an older person of color who chooses to listen to Korean music created by a group of young men who could honestly be my children. Regardless of the closed-mindedness of others, BTS has managed to thrive and so will I, with my BTS t-shirt on and my ARMY light stick in hand.

Curricular Implications

The curricular implications are vast in terms of adding musical elements to lessons. A report published by the Dana Foundation (2008) has shown many positive correlations between the arts and the brain in terms of memory, motivation, reading, and geometry. Studies also show music to be beneficial in the development of oral language and listening skills, reducing anxiety, and more importantly, creating an enjoyable learning environment for students (Werner, 2018). Adding music to a lesson can activate a student’s visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learning styles even though most teaching leans towards linguistic and logical mathematical preferences (Humphries, Bidner and Edwards, 2011). Including musical supplements to lessons and accessing students’ interests in music has potential to develop a deeper level of understanding towards the presented content while keeping students engaged, just as Bruner (1966) did in his lessons. Regardless of grade level, the inclusion of the arts can lead to personal discovery within students as they make connections between the content and themselves, subsequently broadening students’ horizons through the incorporation of music and the arts, especially from other cultures. This could lead to continued learning on the students’ own time, positively impacting the students’ interest and development into a lifelong learner.

As an educator, I have seen the effects of using music within the classroom as a supplement to learning. In early childhood education, it is almost a given that music and artistic expression are somehow incorporated within daily instruction, yet from my own personal experiences, it goes a bit deeper than that. I have watched the faces of my Asian American students light up upon hearing the first notes of “Idol” and “Boy With Luv,” finally seeing someone who looks like them on the big screen. I have also watched my students of varying backgrounds take hold of the Korean language, learn the dance moves, and incorporate BTS into their academic learning, be it writing, mathematics, or art, without me (as their kindergarten teacher) having to do anything to inspire them. Although these experiences are my own, I implore those with the power to add a little flair to their curriculum to do so; it may prove to be beneficial as students navigate their educational journey.

Conclusion

The journey into finding and identifying my love curriculum has put me on a new pathway to improving my practice as an educator. My eyes have been opened to the infinite possibilities into what my teaching can become, not only for me but also for my students. Using student interests, learning styles, and musical/visual elements to enhance curriculum provides an opportunity for students to express themselves and

make connections. It is a doorway to students becoming life-long learners of their craft, hopefully leading them down avenues they never thought they would find. As an educator, I have an opportunity to create a learning environment full of wonder and excitement as kids construct knowledge and make sense of their world through something they love, just as I did through discovering BTS.

In February of 2020, BTS released yet another number one album on the Billboard charts titled *Map of the Soul: 7*. This time, the message includes one of introspection as they try not to lose themselves as their popularity grows. They seek to remain grounded, passionate towards their love of music, and unafraid to admit that they are struggling. Once again, I can relate to their message as a second-year doctoral student as I have hit a brick wall in terms of my motivation. I must continuously remind myself of why I decided to do this in the first place, which is ultimately for the betterment of the children. Although things are hard and at times frustrating, I will continue towards my goal to promote developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education. In the meantime, I will use music as a method of comfort to get me through the rough patches of life, specifically finding strength in the lyrics and melodies of BTS.

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