

Hamilton and Historical Empathy

The Problem

History teachers have been challenged recently to find new ways to get students to engage with the history content. In the era of internet and technology, students are becoming more and more disconnected to the past and the reasoning behind critical decisions. There are various strategies to have students critically think about the past to have them connect on a deeper level. Examples of these strategies include simulation exercises, inquiry projects, debates and discussion, art, and film (Brooks, 2011; D’Amo & Fallace, 2011; Jensen, 2008; Rantala, et al., 2016; Suh, 2013). Two strategies that have limited research on their perceived benefits by teachers is the use of *Hamilton: An American Musical* and historical empathy.

Studies that investigate the use of *Hamilton: An American Musical* and historical empathy traditionally focus on the student perspective and achievement. While researching this perspective on their use in the history classroom is valuable, the much large pedagogical reasoning for their usage remains largely unknown currently.

Results

Results from the teacher perception surveys and Zoom interviews yielded three preliminary findings

1. Engagement and connection
 - Students are engaged when they connect with and are actively participating in their learning
 - Teachers use *Hamilton* as an engagement strategy to get them interested in history and understand the actions of people in the past
2. Previous familiarity with music
 - Participants all had previous familiarity with using other songs and lyrics in their classrooms
 - The majority of participants had previously learned how to play an instrument or sang in choir
3. Historical empathy is implicitly taught, not explicitly
 - Participants utilize historical empathy strategies that are implicitly taught
 - Teaching historical empathy is secondary to teaching the historical content

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gather a better understanding of how and why teachers implement *Hamilton: An American Musical* and historical empathy within their U.S. History classrooms. Additionally, the study would like to understand the perceived benefits or disadvantages of their use by the teachers who employ both in their curriculum. Therefore, the research questions are as follows:

1. What are secondary teacher’s perceptions of the use of *Hamilton* to support historical empathy in the classroom?
2. What are secondary teacher’s perceptions of the use of historical empathy in the history classroom?

“Engagement, engagement, engagement! I also believe that music in the classroom is culturally responsive pedagogy.”

-Engagement

“I played the piano formally for five years. I played the flute for three years and I am a classically trained vocalist with seven years of training, and I was in choir for nine years.”

-Familiarity with Music

“Constant reminder to not judge historical figures by current standards.”

-Historical Empathy

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological methodology with the use of a teacher perception survey, interviews, and a researcher reflection journal

Secondary U.S. History teachers within one Southern California public school district were contacted to participate in the study. Of the 15 teachers contacted, five teachers responded to the survey and four volunteered for Zoom interview.

The survey responses and interview dialogue were reviewed using inductive analysis.

Limitations of the study include

- small sample size
- completion of study during a pandemic
- no student perspective

Implications

Incorporating *Hamilton: An American Musical* and historical empathy within the U.S history classroom has perceived benefits for students by their teachers. The teachers believe that students are more engaged and connected to the content. This means the use of both within the history classroom is responsible pedagogy and has a place within the history classroom.

Teachers who have experience with music before entering the classroom are more likely to utilize *Hamilton* and other music. However, there needs to be more formal training for teachers on how to implement music in a history classroom. Additionally, there needs to be further research into how the use of *Hamilton* affects students in the U.S. history classroom.

Implicitly teaching historically empathy means that it is still a goal of U.S. History teachers in this study. Students are gaining the skills they need to critically think and assess not only history, but the world around them. If they can empathize and see alternative perspectives, maybe they can build a more compassionate world.