Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Disengagement in the Choral Classroom: What Can We Learn from the Students?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify and compare eight students' and one teacher's perceptions of engagement/disengagement in a pluralistic choral classroom. Eight racially diverse 7th grade choir students and their teacher were interviewed to determine their perceptions of supporting conditions and behaviors that signaled engagement or disengagement. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2022) served as a theoretical model through which teacher-enacted choral pedagogy and students' responses were analyzed. The students identified the strong, positive, mutually reciprocated relationship with their choir teacher as foundational to deep engagement. However, pedagogical moves made by their teacher sometimes resulted in cognitive and behavioral disengagement. Students' perceptions of classroom pedagogy aligned strongly with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, notably in the areas of teachers' conceptions of self/others, conceptions of social relationships, and conceptions of knowledge. Resulting implications include the need for teachers who can provide Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, supporting high levels of student learning autonomy, situated in a context of strong teacher-student and student-student relationships.

Keywords: *Culturally relevant pedagogy, engagement theory, disengagement, music education, pluralistic classrooms, choir*

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Introduction

In any space where humans interact, their stories and experiences influence how they interpret dialogue, behaviors, facial expressions, and body comportment. These interpretations, in part, determine how a person might choose to engage in a conversation or activity (Deakin Crick, 2012). Positive connections, feelings of efficacy, interesting events, feelings of belonging, and positive interactions, all individually interpreted, tend to result in choices to engage more deeply in the activity at hand and move further into the physical or emotional space. Contrarily, feelings of rejection, boredom, and fear tend to result in choices to withdraw, or disengage, from a space both physically and/or emotionally (Fredricks, 2011).

The school music classroom serves as a space where humans regularly interact with each other over extended periods of time. Activities in the music classroom center around music-making, music-listening, music-creating, music-moving, and music-studying. Events and interactions in the music classroom are filtered through the students' and teacher's life lenses, and result in interpretations leading to behavioral choices along the spectrum between engagement and disengagement (Irvine, 2001). During high school, music classes are mainly elective, and statistical demographics demonstrate that BIPOC[2] students choose to enroll in elective high school music classes less often than their White counterparts.[3] If humans choose to disengage when they experience an environment as exclusionary, uninteresting, and unaffirming, the question arises: what about the school music classroom might be experienced as exclusionary? If music classrooms should be inclusive, then why and how are BIPOC students underserved by school music programs in the United States?

Scholarship has illuminated historical reasons. In the music education field, teachers are 90% White (Matthews & Koner, 2017) and nonreflective of the general student population in public schools.[4] As White teachers grapple with whiteness as a culture historically entrenched and invested in upholding oppressive societal structures based on race (Bell, 1992/2018; Bradley, 2006; DiAngelo, 2018; Hess, 2015; Koza, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1998), music teachers and music teacher educators may remain unaware of their role in creating (usually unintentionally) spaces that some students experience as exclusionary (Abril, 2009; McCall, 2017; Talbot, 2017).

Research on the enrollment and retention of BIPOC students in music classrooms has been mainly quantitative in nature. Previous studies have identified teacher effectiveness,

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[2] Black, Indigenous, People of Color. This term is meant to signal racialized groups who have experienced oppression in the United States, but can be problematic as groupings of this nature can hide distinction.

[3] Elpus and Abril (2019) found that the demographics of music students in high schools in the United States (42% BIPOC/58% White students in 2009-2013) do not represent the general population of high school students (48% BIPOC/52% White students in 2009-2013). While there is no good way to categorize the construct of race, and race only alludes to one facet of human identity, I hope that by sharing these categorized demographics (which also include persons who identify in multiple categories) the imbalance within high school music is illuminated.

[4] According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website, nces.ed.gov, the student enrollment in elementary and secondary public schools during the fall of 2018 was 47% White. Music teachers, as a population in the United States, are even less representative than the general teaching population, which is 79% White (NCES, 2021).

instruction, and classroom climate as factors that influence students' choices to enroll in music (Butler et al., 2007; Lind, 1999; Lind & Butler, 2005; McKoy, 2013; Stewart, 1991; Walker & Hamann, 1995; Watts & Doane, 1995). However, fewer studies (Abril, 2009; Bond, 2014, 2017; Shaw, 2012, 2016; Spradley, 2013) have explored the experiences of students and their perceptions of teacher-enacted pedagogy in music classrooms.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) provides a "way to think about how things work so then we better understand how things work" (Ladson-Billings, 2020b). Ladson-Billings' seminal scholarship on CRP (1995a, 1995b, 2022) described six tenets of effective teachers of African American students in general classrooms. She identified three pedagogical tenets: cultural competence, sociopolitical consciousness, and student learning. She also identified three ideological tenets, the key beliefs that each of the effective teachers held: *conceptions of relationships, conceptions of self and others,* and *conceptions of knowledge.* In each Culturally Relevant (CR) teachers' practice, the six tenets of CRP manifested clearly but differently based on contextual and personal factors (Ladson-Billings, 2020a).

Ladson-Billings' seminal works (1994, 1995a, 1995b) laid out CRP as a generative theory, providing a viable springboard for extensions and critiques in our evolving landscape. Scholars have subsequently built upon and extended her work. As a "remix" of her theory (Ladson-Billings, 2014), Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy has offered a "respectful and generative loving critique" of CRP and other asset-based pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 4). Ladson-Billings herself has contributed toward these efforts, expanding upon her original writings. For example, Ladson-Billings (2015, p. 417) expanded upon her tenet of cultural competence, invoking James Baldwin when she stated that teachers must tap into youth culture, empowering them to ask questions, examine society and work to change it for the better—agentic engagement. However, Ladson-Billings also noted that the term "culturally relevant pedagogy" has been used as a ubiquitous label describing practices that "rarely represent the practice [she] described when [she] had the opportunity to spend three years with eight outstanding teachers" (Ladson-Billings, 2017, p. 142).

Positing that "the central pieces of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy help us understand what possibilities exist in teaching and learning for all students" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 13), I grounded this study with CRP as the theoretical lens, while also embracing expansions that reflect the social and cultural landscape of today. As Django Paris (2021) wrote:

> One of the remarkable things about Ladson-Billings' career is the way she continues to lead the field through both her past and current work at the same time. She is in many ways a visionary who has, through her writings in culturally relevant pedagogy, critical race theory, and beyond, continually helped chart our path forward in education and society. This has never been more evident than during the unrelenting years of 2020 and 2021. (p. vii)

Paris argued that current, continued, and blatant racist acts of violence, inequitable outcomes in education, and the over-incarceration of BIPOC in the United States give further evidence of an obvious need for steps forward in societal equity. Understanding students' experiences, interpretations, and responses to music pedagogy and how they manifest in the music classroom is critical to identifying hidden ideologies that may perpetuate inequitable pedagogy. In this article, I present the connections between the student participants' perspectives on music classroom pedagogy and the beliefs, or ideologies, of their teacher, Ms. Beckman, framing them with Ladson-Billings' foundational scholarship as well as the writings forming the "remix." To situate discussion on how the beliefs of the teacher often inform their pedagogical practices, I focus specifically on Ladson-Billings' three ideological tenets.[5]

Engagement Theory

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy served as the foundational framework for this analysis; however, as the data collection and analysis developed over the course of one school year, a second theoretical perspective became salient. When the student participants experienced musical events in their choral classroom, their affects displayed evidence of engagement or disengagement. Engagement Theory in a classroom, as theorized by Deakin Crick (2012) and Reeve and Tseng (2011), suggests that student engagement levels flow along a continuum, intertwining behavioral, cognitive, and emotional manifestations of the phenomenon. Viewing behavioral engagement as a signal of cognitive engagement levels offered me an important lens when analyzing classroom events and perspectives. In a recurring event in this classroom, Ms. Beckman asked the students to all sing with feeling, but many students did not comply with that request to her satisfaction. As I interviewed the students, they made it clear that they did not choose a disengaged behavior as a defiant, negative response to her request, but rather as a signal of cognitive disengagement. Their reasoning was: if they did not feel like singing enthusiastically, why would they exhibit that dishonest behavior?

As a general phenomenon, engagement takes place in various social settings. In these settings, the person who is deeply engaged is "an intentional participant in a social process which is taking place over time" (Deakin Crick, 2012, p. 678). Students may choose to engage in church-related, community-related, family-related, or school-related activities. In the school arena, students may engage in a variety of curricular and extracurricular pursuits. Within the classroom, students engage with the teacher, their peers, and the curriculum, both hidden and overt (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012, p. 23). The literature on student engagement has documented ways in which the system or context of the classroom—the learner with their identity and values, the social setting, the learning facilitator, and the

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[5] The pedagogical tenets (student learning, sociopolitical consciousness, and cultural competence) are described in detail in general classrooms by Ladson-Billings (1995a, 2022).

school setting—influenced students' levels of engagement (Deakin Crick, 2012). Positive engagement typically increased when the student perceived warmth and care from their teacher (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012), when the environment felt comfortable, when tasks were structured to be understandable, and when there was support for autonomy (Fredricks et al., 2004).

As autonomy increased, students began to act purposefully within the classroom environment, engaging agentically (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Agentic engagement is a "process in which students intentionally and somewhat proactively try to personalize and otherwise enrich both what is to be learned and the conditions and circumstances under which it is to be learned" (p. 258). Students did not react to classroom materials and contexts as passive subjects, but sought to "act on them—modifying, enriching them (e.g. transforming them into something more interesting, personable, or optimally challenging) and even creating or requesting them in the first place, rather than reacting to them as a given" (p. 258). In classrooms where students played "an active role in constructing knowledge, as opposed to merely reproducing knowledge" student engagement was higher (Fredricks, 2011, p. 332). In these classrooms, teachers took on the role of a guide or facilitator rather than a disseminator of knowledge (Deakin Crick, 2012).

Student engagement is a state that is malleable, influenced by the learner's identity, relationships in the learning environment, setting, and learning tasks. By its nature, engagement is not a characteristic of an individual, but a state that can vary from learner to learner and therefore can be influenced by both the teacher and the students in an educational context. In contrast to deficit thinking about students, which assumes certain students possess negative cultural traits that prevent them from achieving academically, both Engagement Theory and CRP acknowledge that all learners possess the energy, will, and ability to engage in the classroom, and that educational contexts surrounding the learner can be altered to better foster deep engagement.[6] In this study, the student participants displayed behaviors and shared ideas that signaled their desire to contribute to the music classroom in a way that generated more satisfying, challenging, and interesting learning options for themselves, aligning strongly with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Music Education

In choral music education scholarship, empirical research studies focusing on culturally responsive pedagogies[7] in pluralistic classrooms are few (Bond, 2017). Spradley (2013) studied effective teaching in culturally diverse secondary choral classrooms and linked ef-

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[6] See Valencia (1997) for a discussion of the roots of deficit thinking.

[7] I distinguish culturally responsive pedagogies from Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as theorized by Ladson-Billings. Culturally responsive pedagogies, as an umbrella term, encompass pedagogy that seeks to respond to underrepresented students' learning goals, ways of knowing and cultural preferences in order to foster connections and enhance student learning. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy does fall under this category, but is distinguished by its six interweaving tenets.

fectiveness to student engagement, an affirming teaching and learning community, cultural awareness, and pace of teaching and learning. Shaw (2016) followed a teacher and three of his students in a culturally responsive choral classroom and found that the teacher's willingness to support his students as they discovered new choral repertoire and the appropriate vocal styles for performance supported the growth of cultural competence and inter-connectivity between home and school musical environments. Shaw noted that as teachers enact culturally responsive pedagogy, some musical experiences "will likely be validating for some students, while expanding the cultural horizons of others" (p. 62). The complexity of supporting musical learning in pedagogical styles that might be unfamiliar to a teacher opens a path to the unknown, requiring a courageous teacher who embraces moments of not knowing.

In music pedagogies that emphasize the teacher as the knower and the students as the unknowing, a teacher's self-efficacy can become based on the ability to error detect and correct but also the ability to know "more" than their students at any point in time. In this vein of knowledge perpetuation, the teacher may subconsciously tend towards musical repertoire and arrangements as well as classroom interactions and pedagogical practices that are well-known (Harry & Salvador, 2021). Covalle (2022) studied the pedagogy of Gospel music in schools and concluded that for the predominantly White music teaching population, prerequisites to cultural responsiveness in the classroom included a) overcoming a fear of talking about race and racism, but also b) a willingness to learn, through much study, an unfamiliar musical style and its pedagogies.

Scholars have demonstrated that teachers who sought to understand the home discourses of students and created a learning environment that incorporated congruence between home and school music and interactional styles were perceived as more effective by students (Allsup & Sheih, 2012; Boon, 2014; DeLorenzo, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2012; Hoffman, 2012; Shaw, 2012, 2016). To develop such understanding, teachers invested time and energy in learning to know their students over time (Bond, 2014). As no music exists outside of humans and their times and places, situating music within its historical, social and political contexts infuses meaning and fosters connection. Equally important is the opportunity for students to share and hear diverse perspectives on such contexts, interpreting music through their experiences (Bradley, 2012; Hess, 2015; Lind & McKoy, 2016). To add to this scholarship, this study offers implications that can potentially assist music teachers in forming ideologies leading to more equitable and inclusive pedagogical practice in music classrooms.

Methodology

To explore students' perspectives in a pluralistic choral classroom, I searched for a music classroom that was diverse racially and ethnically, with demographics reflecting that of the school district. I reasoned that in a classroom with proportionate demographics, I would find a classroom where students had not elected to drop out of school music. I wanted to interview these students, learn about their experiences, and why they continued to enroll.

Ms. Alicia Beckman's 7th-grade choir class at Clark Middle School, situated in the large Lake City School District, was an ideal site.[8] According to the school's records, the 34 students in this class were 54% African American, 30% White, 11% Latinx, and 5% Asian, demographics that approximated the district's. All of Ms. Beckman's 7th-grade students had elected to enroll in choir, after completing a year of choir in 6th grade.

Ms. Beckman was a 37-year-old White woman with a music education degree from a private music conservatory in the midwestern United States. Before settling with her young family in Lake City, she spent time teaching on the East and West coasts. She had been teaching at Clark Middle for nine years at the time of data collection. The 7th-grade choir class from which the participants were drawn met twice a week for 50 minutes and once each week with the other 7th-grade section of choir at Clark.

I chose to interview eight students from the classroom who represented five different racialized categories. The students self-identified as African American/Black (Gregory, Mila, Jacobi), White (John), Latinx (Ángel and Alice), Asian American (Blossom) and Native American and White (Estephanie). The students and teacher elected to participate in the study; the caregivers also signed consent forms, with the ability to withdraw at any time. I spent two days in the classroom each week over the course of a full school year, conducted two or three individual interviews with each of the eight students and Ms. Beckman, and facilitated two focus groups with the student participants. I videotaped and transcribed every class period I observed and used the video and transcriptions as stimuli for student and teacher interviews, field observations, and comparisons throughout the analysis process.

To navigate the hundreds of pages of transcriptions and field notes, I found the tools of open coding, axial coding, and memoing (Saldaña, 2021; Vanover et al., 2022) to be useful when identifying salient themes that mattered to the participants. Over the course of the school year during which I conducted the research, the processes of constant comparison of data (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), going back for more data, and comparisons within the research literature assisted me in being self-reflexive during the analysis processes.

As a White woman, a music teacher, and a researcher, I acknowledge my situatedness in those areas. Even the concept of race is not without its roots in racism (Ladson-Billings, 2003), and my participation in whiteness cannot be avoided or understated. I am the product of a set of assumptions and experiences which influences even my interpretations of what counts as data. The choices I made when labeling categories and organizing themes arose from the interpretations I made of data rather than from the data as an object. To heighten trustworthiness, I asked the students and teacher if they agreed with the categories I was identifying and the analysis I was forming. Each participant was given access to any analytical writing I was drafting. Any conversations, questions, or ideas they presented

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[8] All student participants' names are pseudonyms chosen by them, and all identifiers (racial, ethnic, etc.) used throughout this article are those that the participants chose and preferred. The names of the district, school, and teacher participant are also pseudonyms.

became part of the data and were interwoven into the analysis.

Individual interviews with students took place immediately following a class period in which they participated and I observed. In my field notes, I wrote down open-ended questions to encourage a conversation about the events during the class period. I hoped to identify events that were salient to the students' experiences in the classroom (positive or negative) and how those events linked to their engagement or disengagement. As we talked, I listened to the students and asked clarifying questions to invite further discussion. At times, I would ask a question with the assumption that a particular classroom event held meaning for them, but they would describe a different meaningful event, and we would discuss that event instead.

Each of the two focus group sessions was thirty minutes long. Four participants attended each semi-structured session. I prepared a description of several classroom events that had emerged as meaningful to students during individual interviews as well as cuing videos of those events. I also located several additional videos of music classrooms to provide stimuli for discussions. In designing and facilitating both individual interviews and focus groups with students, I sought to present material for initial discussion. I then worked to pay attention to student comments, hoping to step back as much as possible to allow for student conversation to dominate.

Findings and Discussion

In this portion of the article, I embed the implications from the data into three sections, connecting them to the findings related to Ladson-Billings' three ideological tenets. I will first describe the findings connected to students' perspectives on relationships, linking the implications to conceptions of relationships. Next, I describe students' perspectives on music repertoire in this choir classroom, relating the implications to conceptions of knowledge. Finally, I describe the effects of disengagement in this classroom and connect the implications to conceptions of self and others.

Student perspectives on relationships

The students in Ms. Beckman's classroom had chosen to take her class again after enrolling in 6th-grade choir the year before. During initial interviews, it became clear that the eight student participants had chosen to enroll in 7th-grade choir for two predominant reasons: they loved singing and they loved singing with her. Within Ms. Beckman's choral classrooms, the students recognized and appreciated her efforts to connect with each student (Gurgel, 2016), not just students who were compliant behaviorally or demonstrated White-normed musical traits such as still body comportment (Gustafson, 2008; Standifer, 1980) or expertise in bel canto style singing (Lundquist & Sims, 1996; Sidran, 1971). She invited them to share their experiences and life goals with her, including written questions on concert reflections such as "What should I know about you? What do you want to tell me about?" The students often eagerly answered these questions, and Ms. Beckman responded

individually to their answers on paper. Her students knew that she enjoyed teaching them and would rather be with them than in any other school or class. When I asked Estephanie about her experiences in middle school, she named Ms. Beckman as a teacher who purposefully strove to form positive teacher-student relationships, even outside of the classroom doors. "Ms. Beckman is the teacher I have who can do that [make connections]. One time I saw her in the hallway, and she said, 'Good job today.' And me and my friend Jason were like, 'That's because we were sitting with people we could sing around.' She makes sure that you feel comfortable."

Culturally Relevant teachers consciously create interactions that support equitable and reciprocal relationships between teacher and students and amongst peers (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Ladson-Billings described such relationships under the tenet of *conceptions of social relationships*. First, CR teachers believe that, as an equitable and reciprocal relationship, the teacher-student relationship extends to interactions beyond the classroom and into the community. Teachers might spend time attending their students' sporting or church events, visiting with caregivers, or interacting at community happenings. Within the classroom, CR teachers purposefully invite the students to act as teachers as they share knowledge and skills gained through individual and community experiences. Second, students are expected to mentor and support each other during classroom tasks as a community of learners, rather than compete in an individualized setting. CR teachers solidify relationships among peers by encouraging collaborative, reciprocal relationships that invite students to be responsible for each other. Third, the teacher demonstrates a connectedness with all students, rather than forming strong connections with only students who are most like themselves.

While Ms. Beckman provided support for students to view each other as valuable, and to celebrate the individual contributions of students to the group, sometimes the choral setting itself presented barriers to deep and positive peer relationships. Due to the large class size, while Ms. Beckman did weave in experiences designed to help students know each other, opportunities for small-group, project-based collaborations were not the norm. Mila wanted to "just be friends with every single kid in the class. And we can get along together and talk with each other outside of class….and sing. Just sit by each other and sing." However, the size and nature of the class (ensemble singing) did not support strong, positive peer relationships. Multiple students I interviewed felt they did not know each other's stories: their backgrounds, life experiences, personalities, strengths, and weaknesses (Gurgel, 2016).

Implications. The findings in this study related to peer relationships suggest that collaborative and equitable relationships among peers are just as important for effective learning in music classrooms as a strong teacher-student relationship. Ms. Beckman believed she was primarily responsible for building and maintaining positive classroom relationships, aligning with this tenet of CRP. As Ms. Beckman demonstrated when she shared her story with students, educators wishing to make their instruction more Culturally Relevant could view their experiences and values as culturally situated, instead of the "norm." Further, educators can approach the classroom with both humility and confidence, assuming they

have a set of skills and experiences to be shared in the classroom, but also that their students have valuable experiences and knowledge to contribute as they co-create the classroom environment.

As in Ms. Beckman's large ensemble class, the size of the class can present special obstacles that music educators must work to overcome if they hope to form a community of learners. Strategies will necessarily be different based on the school community, but the students in this study clearly stated their desire for a classroom culture that celebrated diverse strengths, provided support for multiple learning and interactional styles, and made room for sharing personal stories. Ms. Beckman demonstrated vulnerability as she shared parts of her own story throughout the school year, a strategy that her students admired. She positioned herself as a learner, established patterns of student leadership, and created habits of gathering student feedback. Her students gently requested more collaborative work in their classroom, implying the importance of instructional strategies that include varying sizes of collaborative groups, support for students as they work together to learn and teach, and creative methods of showcasing students' strengths in leadership roles.

Student Perspectives on Musical Repertoire

For the students in this study, repertoire choice played an important role in cognitive engagement. The eight students confirmed that if they did not like a song in choir class, they would most likely choose not to sing during rehearsals. Instead, they might sit quietly, "goof off" with friends, talk to others, or close their eyes and go into their own thoughts. At times, they might sing during a song they did not like solely because their beloved teacher, Ms. Beckman, asked them to do their best and sing.

Importantly, familiarity with a popular song was not the only path to "liking" a song. In this study, the students confirmed that an initial emotional condition for engagement was met when a teacher selected a song they already liked to sing. Estephanie stated that she even joined choir specifically because she heard that they sang songs that were current and popular. However, the students also confirmed throughout this study that if other musical and instructional conditions were not met, the initial emotional connection was not sufficient to sustain their affective and cognitive engagement, leading instead to behavioral disengagement, or not singing.

Three musical conditions worked together to support students' positive engagement, especially during initial instructional sequences, while one instructional condition, challenging and interesting instruction, sustained students' engagement during subsequent class sessions. The first musical condition was a knowledge and understanding of the context and meaning of the song. During my observations at Clark, I witnessed a powerful example of how learning and understanding the historical, social and political contexts surrounding a song influenced and positively affected students' engagement levels. Ms. Beckman had noticed behavioral disengagement from the students during rehearsals on John Lennon's (1971) song "Imagine," and prepared a slide presentation focusing on the contexts sur-

rounding the song. She shared information about John Lennon and Yoko Ono, newspaper clippings that described initial reactions of the public to the song, and live recordings from the time. Jacobi, Gregory, Blossom, and Estephanie all described how Ms. Beckman's efforts produced a much stronger connection to the song, increasing their desire to sing during rehearsals.

The lyrics of a song were the second musical condition that fostered either cognitive engagement or disengagement for the students. The students used the terms *sad, romantic* and *babyish* to describe undesirable lyrics. John stated, "We're up here in 7th grade, and we [shouldn't be] singing those songs we sang in kindergarten music class." Contrarily, lyrics that were meaningful and relatable to them supported engagement, creating a desire to sing.

The final musical condition influencing students' engagement was the groove of an arrangement. In their interviews, the students never used the term groove to describe a song they enjoyed singing. They used terms such as *jumpy, upbeat, techno, having attitude in it, exciting* and *crazy.* By contrast, the students described songs they did not enjoy as *dull, slow, tiring,* or *quiet.* As these terms emerged as descriptions of songs the students did not enjoy, I first wondered if the students preferred songs with a fast tempo since they described undesirable songs as *slow.* However, the two unanimously favorite choir songs that year were "He Still Loves Me" from the movie *The Fighting Temptations* (Jam et al., 2003) and "Man in the Mirror" by Michael Jackson (1987). Both of these songs had slower tempos than the rest of their repertoire. Blossom connected the concepts in one of our interviews:

Ruth: All right, let's talk about the concert. So, on your sheet, you put your favorite part was "He Still Loves Me." Can you tell me why?

Blossom: I think because when everybody was singing it, everybody got louder than the other songs, because it was more crazy…it was more techno, I guess, or something. So, it's like the music that we listen to right now. And not too slow or anything. So then everybody could just start being themselves about it.

Ruth: Would you guess—like on these sheets—would you guess that most kids wrote "He Still Loves Me" as their favorite song out of the concert?

Blossom: Yeah.
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Ruth: And do you know why? Can you guess why?

Blossom: It's a song that you can dance to. Like Ms. Beckman told us—like, we just wanted to start singing, just start moving around, so then more people would want to just be their selves.

Janata et al. (2011) studied attributes of groove in music and young adults' affinity and attraction to songs that grooved, finding that groove was related to the "contrast of interplay of rhythmic patterns across different instruments/drum sounds" (p. 57). For young people in this study, a piece of music grooved when it made them want to move and produced a positive emotional state while playing or listening. Janata et al. identified factors that did not necessarily influence the groove including tempo, familiarity of the music, and the lyrics. Most often, the genre of music that produced a strong sense of groove was R & B or soul, but groove could also be found in jazz, rock, and folk genres. Western European classical music was not tested.

Blossom asked Ms. Beckman during one choir class session if they could collaborate with the band so that they could have more instruments playing, "instead of changing up a lot of things." Other students requested drums, tambourines, and guitar to be added to their version of "He Still Loves Me" which included only the piano accompaniment. For the eight student participants in my study, I concluded that their request for more instruments was a desire for an arrangement that grooved. Especially when a song grooved in its original iteration, students felt a sense of loss when the arrangement was pared down to a piano accompaniment, losing some of the rhythmic elements that created the groove. In the performance of "He Still Loves Me," Ms. Beckman, a skilled pianist, used the technical capabilities of her keyboard to add drums and her own improvisations that supported the groove of the piece. When learning "He Still Loves Me", students engaged agentically when they described their desire to include Beyonce Knowles' solo in their arrangement, a solo not present in the commercial arrangement Ms. Beckman was using. Ms. Beckman worked with her students to incorporate the solo, selecting two unanimously chosen singers from her choir as the soloists. John (a non-dancer by his description) stated that the performance of this song "felt so good that I wanted to start dancing on the risers."

Ms. Beckman's inclusion of the students' requests for the solo demonstrated a powerful manifestation of a tenet of CRP, *conceptions of knowledge*. Ms. Beckman demonstrated her view that knowledge can be co-constructed when, rather than holding fast to the commercial arrangement, she reworked it with her students to create something new that reflected their desires, standards, and strengths. Ms. Beckman demonstrated that she was willing to learn from her students, incorporating their experiences, ideas, and ways of knowing and learning into the classroom. The humility and openness Ms. Beckman exhibited during these sequences of instruction demonstrated what Ladson-Billings (1995b) described as the willingness of a teacher to "be passionate about knowledge and learning… [believing that] knowledge is shared, recycled, and constructed" (p. 481). Ms. Beckman supported the soloists' expertise and celebrated, along with her students, how their singing elevated the performance experience for all of them.

Implications. While repertoire selection is important, Ms. Beckman's students teach us that singing a loved, popular song in school choir is not the key to student engagement or CRP. Student disengagement can occur when teachers select sterile arrangements that

ignore key elements that make the song "good," such as groove. Instead, teachers can work with students to create or locate arrangements of popular songs that maintain rhythmic interplay and other key elements of the original groove. As the students co-produce performances and instruction, teachers can demonstrate CRP in the area of *conceptions of knowledge* by inviting new and creative musical outcomes and modes of learning that are personalized for students at that time and place. In doing so, teachers will not just "dangle hip hop, but *be* hip hop" by encouraging creative resourcefulness, sampling and mixing, resulting in a fresh, never-been-done-before musical product (Ladson-Billings, 2017).

Traditional school ensemble learning modes often employ a pedagogy of correction (Bull, 2022). In a pedagogy of correction, the teacher is trained to hear errors and provide efficient and accurate correction to improve the performance. This pedagogy supports the idea that music must be learned through repetition over time with the goal of a technically perfect performance. However, focusing on perfecting a few pieces over an extended period of time can contribute to over-familiarity and disengagement. Instead, teachers can learn new instructional methods for teaching current popular songs more efficiently. For example, teachers can help students learn the song by identifying and memorizing the form, analyzing the trajectory or arc of the emotion in the lyrics and how that emotion is supported by the arrangement, even interviewing the performer or writer of the song for insight into the composition. Teachers can also identify, with the insight of their students, additional and more frequent outlets for performances, both at the school and in the community. Doing so allows for a higher turnover of repertoire, keeping over-familiarity at bay.

Engagement Theory posits that students who are agentically engaged will demonstrate behaviors that seek to personalize and adjust the learning to be more meaningful for them. CRP posits that, while every student has the desire to agentically engage in their learning environments, it is up to the teacher to facilitate an environment in which student agency is prioritized and supported. When creating instructional plans and facilitating the learning environment, teachers need not assume that students only want to learn current, familiar songs. Ladson-Billings (2017) found that her students demonstrated preferences for Beethoven (his 5th Symphony definitely grooved, according to them), current popular music, and everything in between. The students in my study declared their desire to learn music from all eras and places in choir class, hoping their teacher would instruct them in ways that brought the music to life for them. Following Ladson-Billings' lead to "be" hip hop, teachers can serve as a conduit through which students are invited to explore the historical contexts surrounding a composer or piece of music, analyze performance practices from the place and time of creation, locate and interview culture bearers, study the meaning or lyrics, listen to multiple recordings, and anything else that assists them in enhancing the learning. The students can serve as co-creators of knowledge, resulting in a unique, musical, collaborative classroom outcome.

Effects of Disengagement, Misunderstanding, and "Behavior Talk"

Classroom cycles of disengagement are devastating to student learning (Christenson et al., 2012; Fredricks, 2014). This proved to be the case in Ms. Beckman's classroom as instruction typically halted during times of disengagement. In these moments, Ms. Beckman selected an intervention meant to regain engagement, usually a discussion on appropriate behavior, or what I have termed *behavior talk*. Behavior talk was a segment of classroom talk given by Ms. Beckman to the students following her observation of class-wide disengagement behaviors. This was a flexible strategy that Ms. Beckman employed, meant to draw students' attention to the undesired behaviors and reverse those behaviors. Behavior talk was directed at the class as a whole, and usually included indirect language such as, "Some of you…(are getting us off track, have not been singing, are distracting others, etc.)." Sometimes, brief reminders to focus and participate had the desired effect and classroom engagement increased. More often, however, the segments of behavior talk contributed to the conditions producing disengagement and the disengaged behaviors increased. The following is an example of Ms. Beckman's behavior talk:

> I'm wasting time waiting for you. The one thing that is standing in your way right now is your lack of self-control and your lack of discipline. Because when I was watching you, some of you just really, really didn't cut it. You were up there talking, making faces, distracting other people, laughing…how is that fair?

Behavior talk affected students in different ways. Ms. Beckman assumed that when she used the phrase "some of you," each student in her class would easily understand whether or not she was talking to them since they were either exhibiting the undesired behaviors or not. The students I interviewed did place themselves into the group that was either lacking or exhibiting self-control, according to this behavior talk, but not in the way Ms. Beckman intended. Students such as John and Estephanie, who hid their disengagement by singing on autopilot, assumed they were exhibiting self-control and that other students who were "talking, making faces, etc." were "delinquents" (John's term), did not want to be there, or did not want to sing. Some students, such as Ángel, who (by my observation) were talking and making faces at classmates during this segment of instruction, also excluded themselves from the "some of you." Ángel told me that he chose not to sing because he was "tired and bored," not because he was being "bad or unfair." He had constructed himself as outside of the "some of you" who were being unfair to the rest of the class, even though he admitted to the same behaviors.

The cycle of disengagement in this classroom appeared to produce lowered musical achievement, further disengagement, and fractured group relationships. Students assumed that their classmates and teacher were either judging them as "bad," or were purposefully derailing the forward momentum of the group. As my interviews with the students continued over the course of the year and they began to see how their own experience with

boredom in the classroom resulted in disengagement behaviors, they did begin to reason that perhaps their classmates were experiencing the same phenomenon and that it was the teacher's job to adjust the classroom culture.

As Ms. Beckman puzzled over moments of disengagement in her classroom, she sometimes felt that the students' behaviors prohibited her from delivering effective instruction as the class was halted and she inserted behavior talk. In these moments, she felt that the technical nature of "doing her job" was prevented by students' behaviors. A puzzle such as this can invite teachers to lean into the creative and generative aspects of their conceptions of themselves as teachers. If a teacher believes that they co-create the classroom environment and trajectory with their students, a manifestation of Ladson-Billings conceptions of relationships, they can also simultaneously believe that they are ultimately responsible for facilitating an inclusive space, a facet of their conceptions of self and others.

Ladson-Billings described conceptions of self and others as manifesting in four ways (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Ladson-Billings, 2022). First, teachers in her study believed that teaching their students was important and their work as a teacher was a calling, not just a technical job. Second, they saw their work as a teacher as an art form, a creative endeavor that was different each day. Next, her teacher participants did not define themselves as less worthy teachers if they worked in an economically depressed area. They considered each of their students as intrinsically valuable. Additionally, the teachers often remained in a school and community for many years, viewing themselves as part of the community with a desire to give to the community, purposing students to do the same (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 478). Finally, the teachers believed that each of their students could succeed and achieve, employing the Freirian (Freire, 2018) concept of teaching as "mining" or pulling knowledge out of students.

Ms. Beckman was a long-time member of her school community. She had been teaching at Clark Middle School for nine years at the time of data collection. Ms. Beckman demonstrated her alignment with CR conceptions of self and others by stating, "Middle school? Yes, I prefer middle school. I understand them…I like them so much, I really do. They're normal kids out there, looking for guidance…They just want to be happy." Ms. Beckman's students also recognized that she enjoyed being with them and being their teacher. Jacobi stated that he felt Ms. Beckman would choose her job all over again if she could. For Ms. Beckman, it was painful and confusing when her students seemed to disregard her requests to comply with her instructions to engage behaviorally.

Implications. These findings imply that when an educator senses a negative swing in their class's engagement pendulum, they can be ready with (a) a new assumption, and (b) a new plan to reestablish engagement. First, instead of assuming that the reason for disengagement lies with the students, an educator can begin with the assumption that their own instruction or environment is most likely the root. Then, they might plan to select a new course of action to reestablish engagement. Instead of addressing the class with behavior talk, they could admit the issue might lie with the teacher's choice of instructional mode

or a shift in the environment. For example, the teacher could say, "I sense our engagement is lagging. This usually means something about the instruction is causing boredom or frustration. Can someone confirm or deny this idea for me?" As the conversation with the students progresses, the teacher can ask clarifying questions such as, "Can you tell me more about this?" or "Can someone add to what I'm hearing?" Finally, the teacher can invite the students to share their ideas for solutions, asking, "What might help us regain engagement today?" Or, "I'm going to think about how I can better meet your learning needs, do you have any ideas for me to consider as I do this?" Following this discussion, the teacher can immediately apply what they learned from their students to adjust their pedagogy to be more effective, establishing a collaborative, CRP-based learning environment built on trust.

Conclusion: Striving toward Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

For Ms. Beckman, as for many teachers, understanding why one period of instruction can produce high levels of engagement while another seemingly similar period of instruction (focusing on the same song, perhaps) produces disengagement can be very confusing and disheartening. In the choir class at Clark Middle School, conditions supporting disengagement led to disrupted flow of instruction in the classroom, frustration on the part of both teacher and students, instructional interventions inserted by the teacher, negative affective engagement on the part of both teacher and students, fractured group relationships and, typically, continued disengagement.

The students in this study offered data that clearly suggested they would not engage in music class based solely on compliance to even a beloved teacher's request. They engaged when the music-making was interesting and challenging, and when their teacher connected the musical learning to their lives. In each music classroom, the contexts, resources, and the humans involved will be different, but the ideologies for teachers theorized by Ladson-Billings provide an important road map to understanding the students' perspectives on inclusive music classrooms. Importantly, it is not enough for a teacher to be warm and caring, the teacher must foster a sense of purpose in musical activities resulting in musical achievement and excellence (Antrop-Gonzalez & DeJesus, 2006; Armento, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2022; Toshalis, 2012). For the student participants in this study, purpose and challenge supported deep engagement and formed the foundation for increased student learning, agentic engagement, affective engagement, and group unity.

As I interviewed Ms. Beckman and the eight students in this study, I explored how students' experiences at home, in school, and with music intersected in the 7th-grade choir. I also looked across their perspectives to find commonalities that suggest important focal points for engaging in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in music classrooms. My analysis does not provide a way to generalize "best practices" for instruction of students in racialized groups. However, as the students described their perspectives, they highlighted links between engaging musical pedagogy and CRP that suggest effective approaches for music classrooms. Future research can continue to explore the connections between the six tenets

of CRP and effective music teaching. Research is needed in school music settings where teachers practice all six tenets of CRP, resulting in strong levels of engagement and musical achievement among pluralistic student groups. This research can provide more examples of how CRP manifests in the music classroom. Future research can also seek to understand how pluralistic student groups perceive school music pedagogy in settings other than the choir classroom, comparing the students' perceptions to CRP. If music educators seek to provide conditions that support a sense of belonging coupled with achievement, then listening to and incorporating students' perspectives holds promise for both K-12 classroom pedagogy and music teacher preparation.

As a teacher with CR conceptions of knowledge invites students' insights into the classroom, a collaborative and innovative learning environment emerges. When a teacher's conceptions of relationships prioritize equity, students can celebrate group accomplishments and individual strengths, knowing that each of them has unique and valuable contributions to make. In line with Ladson-Billings' conceptions of self and others, when a teacher believes that teaching is an art form, they see their work as a dance between the strengths and interests of the students, the teacher's skill in facilitating agentic musical learning, and the vibrancy of the community. In the introduction to this article, I suggested that students may choose to disengage from school music when they experience the environment as exclusionary. Ms. Beckman and her students have generously shared their perspectives on what makes a musical classroom space engaging, inclusive, and affirming. Now it is our turn to implement their thoughts and move forward with their vision for innovative, unique, inclusive, and collaborative music classrooms that teachers co-create with their students.

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