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Meaningfulness and relevance of a student-planned social justice choral event: how American high school students used choir to tell their own stories

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

Dissertation

**MEANINGFULNESS AND RELEVANCE OF A
STUDENT-PLANNED SOCIAL JUSTICE CHORAL EVENT:
HOW AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS USED CHOIR
TO TELL THEIR OWN STORIES**

by

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Dedication

I dedicated this research to all the independent thinkers who aren't afraid to do things their own way, to all the teachers who choose to put their students first, to all the musicians who view perfection not as a final goal but as a means to expression and communication, to all the students striving to find their own voice, and to all the parents who take the time to listen to children's opinions. May this research serve as an inspiration for continuing to choose your own path.

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This dissertation is a part of my journey as a musician, a teacher, a student, and a researcher. While the journey has, at times, been arduous and lonely, I have never actually been alone during it. Throughout every step, I have had people there to support me, encourage me, and listen to me. For all of those wonderful and amazing people, I will be forever grateful.

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ABSTRACT

In the US, many school music programs teach in a monocultural and hegemonic manner that quiets student voice. I strove to encourage student voice in my choral classroom by inviting students to plan their own social justice choral concert on a topic of their choosing. My practices were grounded in care and storytelling, with aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and critical pedagogy. The culminating concert event functioned as performance, a social justice activity, and a collective narrative by the students about mental health.

This qualitative instrumental case study examined the teaching practices and resulting concert event through observation notes, field notes, artifacts, and interviews. The study focused on three research questions: (1) How do students and audience members perceive meaningfulness and relevance of a student-led social justice concert that was the product of a dialogic choral project? (2) In what ways, if any, did power dynamics between teacher and students affect the classroom and learning? and (3) In what ways, if any, did student goals for the project promote student voice and

empowerment through storytelling? Data were analyzed using both deductive and inductive methods.

Results indicated that students and audience members experienced meaningfulness and relevance at the concert event. Students also experienced meaningfulness, relevance, and empowerment through planning and rehearsal processes, and the shift to more dialogic teaching enabled students to tell their collective story. Care permeated the project. The connective tissue of care became the focus in the analysis and synthesis. Recognizing its importance, I created the Educational Care Spiral (ECS). The ECS builds upon research in *caring about*, *caring for*, and *caring with* to create a spiral that depicts the potential impact and influence of different types of care in the classroom.

The results of this research suggest a potential way forward for choral education that is more inclusive and empowering for diverse student populations, affording students opportunities to create dynamic and relevant concert programming rooted deeply in their communities. It is adaptable to varying school scenarios and programs and can be done with sensitivity and awareness of any potential cultural or political constraints, while potentially promoting the study and respect of varying musical styles, genres, and sounds. The ECS provides a tool for studying the influence and implementation of varying types of care in the music classroom, with the potential to inform teaching practices and provide educators with an accessible tool with which they can study their own teaching methods and classrooms.

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Meaningfulness and Relevance of a Student-Planned Social Justice Choral Event: How American High School Students Used Choir to Tell Their Own Stories

Chapter 1: The Story with Many Beginnings

I raise my arms, the students come to attention, I cue the accompanist, and the March concert begins. Ninety minutes of singing ensues, filling the air with music from many different styles and eras, all performed by students aged 14–18. These students represent a wide cross-section of the private Catholic school where I teach — serious musicians, students singing just for fun, academics, athletes, student council members — all high achieving students at a college preparatory school coming together to perform for their families and friends. They have memorized their music and improved their vocal techniques. I introduced them to many styles and genres of music, and they even learned some of the history behind those musical works, but to what end? Parents applaud for skills developed and the entertainment produced by the students during the evening, and students have more knowledge and performance experience than they did before their learning for the concert began. Despite my pride in my students though, I am left with a certain hollowness.

I consider the bigger picture of my choral program. How is this concert meaningful and relevant to my students and their future? The short answer: I don't know. For the few students who will go on to pursue music in college, the knowledge and skills acquired move them one step further on their path, but the other concerts and music events of the year serve that purpose better. For the other students, many of whom will follow in the footsteps of the school's elite alumni to become business leaders, doctors,

lawyers, politicians, and industry leaders, this concert is an enjoyable but temporary blip on their high school radar. The students have acquired musical skills deemed important by the National Association of Music Education (NAfME), meeting varying levels of NAfME's Ensemble standards in its three prescribed areas of Performing, Responding, and Creating (NAfME, 2014), but I question the relevance of those musical skills outside of my classroom.

Regarding context, the students learned the historical background of some of the works they performed and reflected upon the possible intended meanings of those works or their potential impact on listeners, but that does not guarantee personal meaningfulness, certainly not to an extent that it will impact their lives outside of school or even affect their selection of music for their online playlists. I took some student song suggestions and included those music selections in the concert, but the concert was still planned, taught, and interpreted by me. The music did not necessarily connect with my students' hopes, dreams, and identities, nor did it necessarily express the realities of their daily lives outside of my choir classroom.

The big overarching purpose of this particular concert for my students remained unclear to me. I wondered if I was producing the concert simply because we produce four concerts each year and this filled one of those spots. It seemed as if the concert benefitted the choral program overall more than the students. They displayed their abilities through their singing voices, demonstrating their continued musical study, but the students' inner voices remained hidden. It was not particularly meaningful or relevant to the students, nor did it assert their identities or express their personal views.

The situation described above relates my own thoughts and reflections after the March concert one year at my school. As the choir director, I have worked to imbue each concert with purpose and identity, trying to ensure that students receive the well-rounded, purposeful, and fulfilling music education I feel they deserve, but the March concert had been troubling me. It was an enjoyable concert with a nice variety of music and vocal techniques, but I felt like it needed to be more than just a stopping point between the Christmas concert and the celebratory final concert of the year; I just could not quite put my finger on how or why. I was unable to determine what a new vision for the March concert should look like. I began researching choral practices, striving to find a solution to my dilemma, but I initially came up empty-handed. I hoped to find inspiration through accounts of diverse and meaningful choral practices that connected with students on varying levels. Instead, as my literature review in chapter 2 reveals, I was bombarded with research pointing out countless problems, including many issues I was already working to overcome (albeit with mixed success). It seemed that little had changed in many choral classrooms for multiple decades, and many of those age-old traditions were outdated and problematic in today's society. Eurocentrism, hegemony (Spruce, 2015), bias (Gustafson, 2008; Hess, 2018a), extreme competitiveness (Abramo, 2017; Allsup, 2010; Hess, 2024; Mantie, 2024; Powell, 2023), and elitism (de Quadros, 2019; Regelski, 2006) were all common descriptors of choral education and choral practices in the US. Furthermore, most choral music in the US focuses on the Western canon (de Quadros, 2019), a characteristic found to be true of many American music education experiences as demonstrated by the dominance of Western classical repertoire, western-standard music

notation, and still comportment while performing (Hess, 2018a), practices which can marginalize and exclude those from other traditions (Hess, 2017b, 2018a). I was disheartened by the lack of variety regarding choral repertoire and teaching approaches in US schools – the issue was much more prominent than I had anticipated. If I wanted to combat these widely accepted practices, I first needed to gain a better understanding of them. I decided to examine the Western canon more closely in hopes of acquiring a stronger and more nuanced perspective regarding its dominance and place in music.

The Western Canon and Traditional US Choirs

When looking up “canon” in the Merriam Webster online dictionary, I found multiple definitions, but the most applicable was definition 3c: “a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works” (Merriam Webster online, n.d.). Within music, the Western canon’s sanctioned body of work is Western classical music, promoted as official and formal musical knowledge by those in authority. Wamwa Mwanga (2025) noted that such authority, claimed in the 1700s in England, was part of the political and social agenda of the elite, becoming the “framework through which the classics are idolized” (p. 18). Wamwa Mwanga (2025) argued that the Western canon has grown since that time, adding and expanding, but always adapting in such a manner as to “restore its authority” (p. 18).

Gustafson (2008) discussed the original purpose of music education in the US, noting its attempt to create “cultured” citizens who would embody what was deemed as the proper version of civilized society by upper class Americans at the time, teaching children to act a certain way, speak a certain way, and embrace certain aesthetic values.

Adopting the Western canon as the legitimized music for music education aligned with those beliefs. *Musical canonicity* was defined by wamwa Mwanga (2025) as “a monistic system that operates by exhausting all aspects of musical-epistemological differences” (p. 15). His use of the word “epistemological” is noteworthy; the Western canon is a way of knowing, appreciating, hearing, learning, and performing music. In early US schools, musical canonicity was used alongside other practices to work to more fully assimilate youth into accepting and acting upon specific cultural and citizenship ideals, reinforcing certain behaviors and aesthetics as civilized while discouraging others through their classification as primitive. Often tied in with ideals of Whiteness, this othering of different musics, aesthetics, and forms of expression continues to this day (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018).

My experiences as a piano student illustrate these sorts of restrictions. My teacher taught me only classical repertoire and would not even spend time in lessons to answer questions I might have about any musical theater or popular music I was choosing to learn by myself because she did not consider such music worthy of her time. She also dictated how I dressed for competitions and performances: long dresses or skirts (no pants allowed), hair back from around my face, small earrings (nothing dangling), and she preferred long sleeves but would allow me to wear short sleeves because I had “nice elbow dimples” that were pleasing to look at (absolutely nothing sleeveless). In her opinion, any clothing that deviated from these parameters was inappropriate for a young woman to wear on stage.

The choral groups I was a member of in high school included similar formal

requirements regarding clothing, and the directors valued the classical bel canto sound above all others. My experiences as an orchestral violinist in school followed comparable restrictions: gendered formal clothing, classical music, and heavy reliance on Western Standard Music Notation (WSMN), with any deviation catching heavy criticism. None of these experiences exposed me to non-classical musical experiences and sounds; my home life gave me those. Such heavy Eurocentricity and formality is evidence of music education's continuing entrenchment in policies, whether written or inferred, that promote the Western canon while marginalizing and diminishing other musics and aesthetics.

The embeddedness of Eurocentricity and formality in music education is not mere happenstance; it is part of the policy of education in the US. Schmidt (2017) argued for a broad definition of educational policy, noting that it “takes on multiple shapes” and is “as much legislation as it is a set of practices, as much analysis as it is a disposition, as much process as a set of outcomes” (p. 12). As such, policy, whether formally written or inferred and maintained through decades of practice, has far-reaching impacts. Schmidt (2017) noted how policy can “give credence” to certain voices and encourage “particular kinds of thinking and action” (p. 12). Smith et al. (2022) noted this when examining the effect of policy on popular music education, specifically mentioning how the economic value of popular music places it within a different hierarchy of values than Western art music. Changing policy can be difficult. The practices and values are so ingrained, that Smith et al. (2022) described music education in the US as “a highly professionalized and credentialized industry” that is “self-sustaining,” and a “well-oiled music industry

machine” (p. 97).

Smith et al. (2022) also argued that the trivialization of popular music, compared to the Western canon, has been reinforced through policy (p. 101), and they are not alone in noting the dominance of the Western canon. It is not just popular music that has been marginalized and diminished, it is all musics not fitting within the Western canon, a concern that has arisen both in the US and the Western world more broadly. As I elaborate upon in Chapter 2, numerous researchers have noted this othering of musics, describing the prominence of Western classical music in schools and its Eurocentric nature (Gustafson, 2008; Kelly-McHale, 2016; Spruce, 2015). Others have remarked on the dominance of WSMN and lack of advanced aurality (Hess, 2018a; Kivijärvi & Väkevä 2020). The duality of such dominance and othering demonstrates that while music within the Western canon can be valuable and expressive and WSMN is often used as an important tool for notating and learning music, continually placing such practices in positions of superiority can be problematic.

The way that Eurocentric music is taught could also be considered part of the Western canon, because it reinforces a specific epistemology. Kelly-McHale (2016) called the common score-centered and sequence-centered approaches in classrooms “assimilationist” due to their assumption that reliance on such approaches with their “Western conceptions of music education” (p. 222) are the foundation of success, while the student’s culture, prior knowledge, and lived experiences are ignored or considered too primitive to contribute towards musical knowledge and mastery. There are countless music education courses and professional development options that discuss different

methods of teaching note-reading, solfege, music theory, score analysis, and other Western canon ideals of music instruction. Unfortunately, it is much more difficult to find resources to assist music teachers in the US in implementing creative and collaborative non-Eurocentric musical practices such as advanced aurality, cultural singing and dance of indigenous populations, aural-based drumming, call and response, improvisation, or other non-Eurocentric musical practices. Palkki et al. (2016) noted this overall lack of creativity and collaboration in professional development content and music conference sessions during which most material is focused on band, orchestra, or choir content rather than improvisation skills, composition, or other types of creative endeavors. A lack of support to attend professional development also creates obstacles for music teachers wishing to expand or improve their teaching, with many music teachers forced to fund their own travel and registration costs for professional development due to lack of available state and school district funding (McCaffrey & Lovins, 2019; West, 2021). The obstacles created due to lack of available professional development and training in advanced aurality in my own teaching provide a specific example of such limitations. One of my students requested a Mexican popular music piece for her senior solo. The piece was by an artist from her country of origin, and I found educational value in studying the work. It worked on range, breathing, and specific stylistic elements for the soloist and provided the opportunity for my other students to embrace a rhythmic feel and harmonic color they were unaccustomed to singing. Wishing to stay true to the work, I chose to teach the piece entirely by ear. I knew the subtler nuances in the rhythms would not easily translate to WSMN, and for my students to really embrace the harmonies it

would be better for them to hear and feel them rather than read them. Unfortunately, I found such teaching practice very difficult because I had no experience doing something like that in a classroom. I was able to find the lyrics online, then learn the chords by ear, but teaching my students to then create appropriate harmonies by ear and feel the rhythms of the work required a substantial amount of independent problem solving and experimentation on my part.

Othering (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018) also occurs through the valuing of certain aesthetics in music, another aspect of the Western canon. Good-Perkins (2020) noted the dominance of the bel canto vocal sound, resulting in the diminishing and marginalizing of other voices and styles. She argued that those reproducing the bel canto sound are celebrated and elevated in music hierarchy, while those demonstrating proficiency in other styles and sounds are given less prestige and respect, placed lower in hierarchy than their bel canto classmates, and seen as somehow less important in the world of music. Music competitions also reinforce specific aesthetics and inhibit personal connection and musical play, implying a superiority of certain musics (Abramo, 2017; Allsup, 2010; Mantie, 2024; Powell, 2023). Such competitions promote achieving success at the expense of another rather than embracing collaboration and the learning process (Kohn, 1992). As I noted above, my choir experiences valued the bel canto sound above all other vocal qualities, and the competitions we won reinforced such disproportionate valuing. Many choir, concert band, and orchestra competitions today still reward students for reproducing similar Eurocentric standards of sound and aesthetics (Powell, 2023).

De Quadros (2019) explained that the definition of choir in Western society does not match group singing traditions in various other parts of the world, and many of the commonplace choral rehearsal and performance practices embraced in US choirs are hierarchical in nature. I have followed many of these practices in the past in my own choirs, dictating every interpretation and expression from a hegemonic position of authority to students standing in formal rows in front of me. I now teach much more informally, with my students gathered around the piano, but a hierarchy still exists, and I struggle to find a balance between the traditional hierarchy that defines US choir and the more collaborative and supportive environment I want for my students.

Personal experience demonstrated to me that the long-standing choral traditions in which I was educated are valuable, but when used exclusively they potentially relegate choir to a ritualistic and elitist activity that lacked relevance and remained isolated from the diversity and empowerment sought by the students in front of me. Research supports my conclusions. DeLorenzo et al. (2019) noted the dominance of such formal “presentational” practices, different from “participatory” and “communal” practices that involve more audience participation and active interpretations and contributions by all involved (p. 88). Unlike the presentational practices I had regularly maintained, these other more informal and collaborative practices did not force the audience-performer separation, nor did they maintain any specific hierarchy. My misgivings regarding my own teaching practices seemed to align with Kelly-McHale (2016), who questioned whether or not the Western canon truly defined Americans musically and socially.

In a way, I was caught in a paradox not unlike that described by Freer (2011), who

declared that the choral performance standards emphasized through competitions, conventions, and tradition, do not align with the educational outcomes desired by many educators. Freer (2011) wrote that in dealing with that paradox, educators encounter “innumerable tensions between musical compositions, educational standards, artistic goals, and human beings” (p. 176). Turner (2024) noted similar struggles when striving to individualize instruction and encourage student autonomy within a system partially engulfed in competition standards and awards. I thought, once again, of my own experiences as a student. I wondered how my teachers had felt as they navigated the various requirements, standards, and desires of being a music educator. In high school, I was musically successful by all of the accepted standards of the day (trophies, ratings, performances in elite settings, and masterclasses with traveling professional classical musicians), and I very much enjoyed music throughout my high school years, but there is no denying that my accomplishments served the programs and teachers under which I studied as much as they served me. I wondered if those teachers and directors ever had misgivings. Often paraded around as a shining example of the school’s musical achievements and celebrated during luncheons as one of my piano teacher’s crown jewels, I enjoyed the limelight and awards, but I also struggled with my own musical identity. I loved the music I practiced and performed formally, but I also grew up in a home where Neil Diamond played on the stereo and my mom was constantly singing her favorite pop songs and hymns. I went to country music concerts, accompanied musical theater productions, and enjoyed playing Scott Joplin rags. All of these, both the classical and the non-classical musical experiences, were part of my musical identity. They all

functioned as the beginning of my lifelong story with music, but only the classical works received formal and public acceptance.

It was not my music teachers but my parents who encouraged me to play non-classical music. I wondered if my teachers were ever aware or concerned about the one-sided education they provided. My piano teacher felt that non-classical works were not worthy of her attention, yet as an adult I use my non-classical skills regularly to earn a living. The last we spoke she expressed disappointment in some of my teaching and career choices. Powell's (2023) reflections regarding the constraining nature of competitions could have been written about my own choir and orchestra directors who were hindered by the schools in which they taught. They recognized that competitions helped ensure the future of the school's music programs, so while they may have personally championed individual music expression they chose to maintain the aesthetic ideals encouraged by competition standards as a means of helping ensure their programs' futures. Luckily, I currently teach at a school where group competitions are not required. However, that does not automatically equate to inclusion and individual musical expression. I needed to find a way to live within the tensions that existed in my own teaching space: the love and respect for diverse musics, the performance expectations of my school, the voices and identities of the students I taught, the elite academic environment of the school, and the desire to serve and impact society.

Statement of the Problem

There is more to studying music than just learning the notes and techniques or striving for a perfect performance. In broader research, Burunat et al. (2025) explored

music, memory, and meaningfulness across various age groups and concluded that “music serves not only as a cue for identity-anchored memories from youth but also as a flexible emotional anchor that evolves with life experience” (p. 10), with some findings suggesting particularly strong connections with music during adolescence. Examining music education specifically, Ilari et al. (2013) discussed singing and identity construction, portraying singing as a form of communication and an expression of values. Smith (2019) also presented an intense connection between music and identity, noting the inevitability of music education’s impact on students’ identities. Yet, as noted in my own example and my research into canonicity and Eurocentricity, many choral concerts do not necessarily reflect the individual identities of the students involved or their values.

Music educators can connect with students’ life experiences and communities through approaches such as critical pedagogy (CP) (Abrahams, 2005), culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014), and counterstories (Chapman, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). However, successful and effective implementations of these theories and methodologies in music classrooms across the US have not been widespread, with many attempts falling short of their intended goals. A consequence of such shortcomings is that much of music education, including choral concerts, may often not reflect or welcome the diverse identities, values, and communities of participating students (Mantie & Tucker, 2012). Rather, hegemonic music education practices continue (Wamwa Mwanga, 2025), maintaining longstanding traditions, policies, and standards that, while potentially beneficial, can also be harmful (de Quadros, 2019). Instead of embracing the

ethos of approaches such as CP, CRP, and CSP that could promote students' voices and empower students to examine the world, many music educators function as gatekeepers (Hendricks, 2021b), marginalizing minoritized students and silencing those with diverse perspectives.

Attempts at Addressing the Problem

This problem did not just exist in the greater world of academia or in other people's classrooms, it existed in my own classroom. It was a problem I could examine in my own environment, and perhaps my insights could inspire others in the music education world. Maybe I could shift my teaching approach and use the March concert to better represent student identities and values. As I began imagining the possibilities of the March concert being centered on student expression, individual identities, and society, I realized that I needed to explore different ways of looking at education. Armed with more knowledge, I could then explore alternatives for both my own classroom and the broader field of choral education.

Non-Hegemonic Approaches to Teaching

I examined many existing theories as I worked to diversify my teaching and approach music education critically. As I will discuss more in Chapter 2, I found that scholars had developed various theories and methods within the broader educational field to potentially help teachers better connect with students and student identities in multiple areas, including culture and ethnicity, identity and empowerment, and storytelling. To better embrace and represent the identities and cultures of students, CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and later CSP (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014) were

promoted. I was particularly intrigued by Ladson-Billings's (1995) approach to respectfully diversifying teaching, which, when applied to music, could include culturally relevant repertoire and vocal styles, the use of culture bearers, and the push for connections between home and community. The increased depth encouraged by CSP (Ladson-Billings 2014; Paris & Alim 2014) was an important addition. I could see the potential for a school music program to build sustainable community partnerships and cultural competency in a non-hierarchical manner.

Student empowerment and the development of student autonomy could be manifested alongside embracing student identity and cultural values through CP (Freire, 1970). Abrahams (2005, 2017) described potential applications of CP in music education, outlining five tenets to guide music educators in using CP. I was struck by the potential for empowerment and vision within the CP framework. I felt that viewing my teaching through the lens of CP would encourage implementation of practices that could really help my students explore how they could use music to both express themselves and impact the world around them.

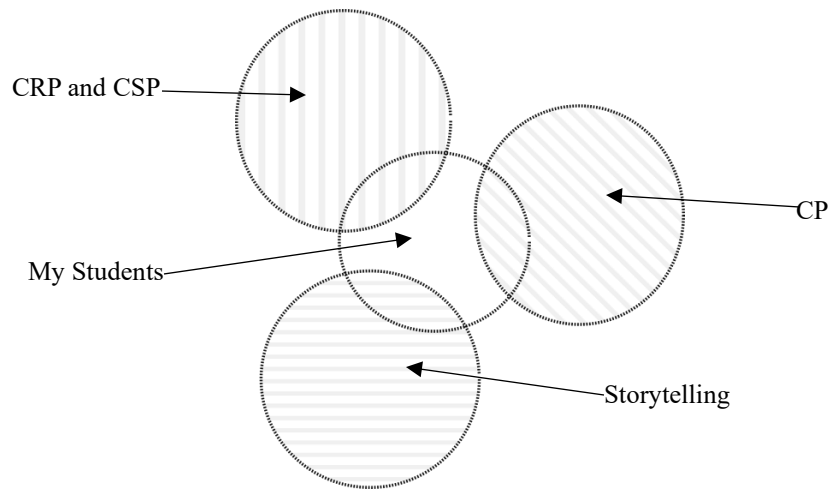
While exploring student empowerment, I also found critical race theory (Chapman, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Exploring the theory, I found the valuing of stories and counterstories particularly appealing. Seen as a means of valuing the experiential knowledge that individuals bring with them, particularly those normally marginalized by society, and validating the importance of how others view the world (Chapman, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), stories can provide a powerful means of authentic connection. Gay (2018) argued that stories can “entertain, educate, inform,

evoke memories, showcase ethnic and cultural characteristics, and illuminate abstractions” (p. 3). They can also help individuals gain empathy, shifting their perspective so they see through another’s eyes (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). In music education, Bylica (2020) explored a practical use of storytelling in the classroom through student-created soundscapes, while Schmidt (2017), and Williams (2021) explored the value of stories in music education from a research perspective. Applying Ilari et al.’s (2013) discussion of the varying types of identities that can be explored and developed through music, and the opportunity for students to use music to present their values, I felt that storytelling provided an additional means for students to share and develop their identity in and through music.

Despite the compelling concepts from these theories, however, I struggled to put all of these separate elements together in practice, and each element alone felt incomplete in my classroom. The focal point of one lens seemed to leave out important points from another, and those exclusions often resulted in continued silencing or othering of some of my students. My students were my central focus, but there were many not seen or heard through the varying individual theoretical lenses. Figure 1 illustrates the predicament I experienced.

Figure 1

My Attempt at Serving My Students Through Varying Theoretical Lenses



It was not until I read about the different forms of Care¹ expressed by Noddings (2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017) that I began to see how all the various elements could connect in my own teaching. The notions of *caring about* and *caring for* embraced by Noddings (2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017), and the element of *caring with* later described by Hendricks (2021a, 2023, 2025) will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, but when I first encountered them, they seemed a perfect fit for my style of teaching and the community and service focused environment in which I taught. Although I was already attempting to examine my choral program through a wide variety of lenses, I realized that Care was important enough to warrant yet another analysis of my teaching.

¹ There are numerous types of Care. When referring to general care, as used in everyday conversation or general caring actions, I use the term with a lowercase letter. However, when using the term to indicate the more complex notion of Care, encompassing all its different academic differentiations, I have chosen to capitalize the term to denote its more formal and specific use.

I reflected on my own concert programming. In addition to working to meet various music learning standards and goals, I focused each concert on something different. The October concert presented a nice balance of music literature and vocal styles, serving as an introductory concert for the year that embraced varying genres, techniques, and musics that reflected multiple traditions, with some contextuality to help students relate to music they did not know. I taught the material for the concert through the lens of CRP and CSP, but it was early in the year, so I did not yet know the students well. I also taught the content with care, but not purposely specific forms of Care.

The December concert was more focused on the Christian celebration of Christmas and the secular traditions surrounding the Christmas holiday season, appropriate for the Catholic school in which I taught. That concert presented music that represented many of the diverse Christmas celebrations of my students, including Spanish Christmas songs that my immigrant students grew up singing, Christmas hymns from different church traditions, and favorite holiday pop songs from students' playlists. The preparation and rehearsals leading up to this concert also incorporated elements of CRP and CSP, but a hint at student stories through some of the traditions expressed was also present. I *cared about* my students and their holiday traditions and attempted to *care for* them through the acknowledgment and inclusion of those traditions, but the primary focus was on all of us demonstrating care together, as a community. Unfortunately, I realized that my attempt was incomplete; it was too hierarchical, never really functioning in a *caring with* manner.

Looking back at May concerts from previous years, they were known for having a

celebratory nature. Many seniors had solos, the music was more popular and musical theater focused, and the students were typically very emotionally engaged. The general care expressed throughout the year in the classroom came across on the stage through the camaraderie, trust, and vulnerability the students demonstrated during that final performance of the year. Without specifically modeling it, I had managed to create a concert and rehearsal environment in which some students *cared with* each other, but it was not widespread. I could see that purposely expanding care in my teaching to incorporate the different forms I had read about would make that concert even stronger.

The March concert, however, did not fill any specific niche compared to these other three. As I noted previously, I needed to focus more on student identity, expression of values, and interaction with society in my teaching, and I hoped the March concert could somehow meet those goals. After examining the literature I had read, I realized it was the critical pedagogy and storytelling aspects that were missing, and purposely incorporating varying types of Care in my classroom could help me bring forth those missing elements in my classroom. As things stood, only hints at critical pedagogy existed through the study and performance of specific songs whose context or meaning could have deeper meaning and implications for the students involved, nothing that truly empowered students to tell their own stories or change the world around them.

DeLorezno et al. (2019) presented various ideas for music making that could help create social and cultural transformations, from general teaching practices that encouraged respect and care of student difference, to specific teaching ideas that asked students to write lyrics or create iMovies that connected music to the injustices in their world. While

all of DeLorenzo et al.'s (2019) ideas might not be applicable in my context, I certainly felt that I could discover and implement new or different pedagogical practices that would encourage students to express themselves and have a positive impact on the world around them.

Moving Toward Social Justice

Donaldson (2020) described a collegiate social justice concert he presented with his students, and I wondered if there was a way to create something similar at my high school. It was focused on a specific topic, contained readings within the concert to help contextualize the music, and included in-depth analysis of the meaning behind the lyrics during the rehearsal process. However, as I will explain in Chapter 2, there were aspects of Donaldson's approach that I did not find appealing for my situation, particularly his top-down approach and strong focus on modern classical repertoire. I also felt that addressing race was not an ideal social justice topic in my environment. Our racial and ethnic diversity had increased, but we were still a predominantly white school. Placing a predominantly white choir on stage to sing about racial injustice seemed presumptuous, more like elitist rescuing than actual social justice. It also did not necessarily reflect my students' identities.

Hoping for other inspiration, I began looking for alternative examples of social justice work with choirs. De Quadros (2019) described community and outreach approaches to choral music that were very appealing to me, in part because of their more ground-up approach. Rather than dictating down from on high, these seemed to work more from the ground level first, directly engaging with diverse peoples and valuing

input from all those involved rather than implementing directives and visions sent down from a single ruling entity or director.

These practices, which included community choirs engaged in anti-racist work, specific community ensembles focused on raising awareness for a specific cause, and choral groups of incarcerated individuals that encouraged their members to create their own songs, included diverse repertoire and singing practices, collaborative rehearsal practices, and choir-member input. They also encouraged a distinction between studying social justice and actually holding a social justice event, which I will draw more upon throughout this dissertation. De Quadros (2019) identified five frames of activity important for all social justice events. These frames of activity, provided with the numerous examples of socially minded community choirs, demonstrated a distinct shift away from traditional choral power dynamics and embraced a much broader definition of choral music and choir purpose. Maybe that power shift and broader definition was the answer I had been seeking. I hoped that I could potentially enter into meaningful and empowering dialogue in my own classroom through the concert planning and rehearsal processes and somehow transform school choir to include a broader and more activist minded vision.

By applying a more dialogic approach to teaching, I sought to inspire my students to choose not just parts of the concert but the entire focus and programming. I hoped they would feel empowered to choose a topic that would express their own identities while also altering their world and the world around them, making this concert an experience that was relevant and meaningful to them in multiple ways. Hess (2017a) discussed the

importance of counteracting existing power imbalances to truly make room for all voices; a more dialogic approach would allow me to make that room by removing myself from the decision-making process as much as possible. If the students picked a topic that was personally relatable to them, I felt there was less chance of falling into the trap mentioned by Hess (2017a) of reinscribing existing power dynamics and hegemonies. The students could research the topic, pick the music, figure out the readings, determine the concert flow, and connect with a local service organization; I would facilitate and teach the musical concepts. It was designed to embolden the students so they could tell their own stories and determine how they might impact their own community.

First, however, I had to determine what social justice might mean in my teaching setting. Teaching at a private Augustinian school meant that I was not bound by all of the regulations faced by public school teachers. Any public activist-minded or social justice programs had to be approved by the headmaster, but as an Augustinian he was a firm believer in truth and respecting human dignity, so he was open to most social justice ideas and topics as long as they were presented in a properly contextualized manner. Even so, my ideas regarding social justice, or those of my headmaster, might not be the same as those of my students. I needed a broad and inclusive definition of social justice.

Although I was not previously familiar with her work, I found Fraser's (2009) writings regarding participatory parity particularly intriguing. I felt that embracing participatory parity could potentially provide a different type of justification upon which to base critical pedagogy. Focused specifically on participation, Fraser (2009) evaluated the fairness of a society based on whether or not all its members can participate fully

socially and politically, noting the importance of public spheres in expressing and forming identity. This broad definition could allow space for students to address multiple issues, from specific blatant political and social oppression issues to more nuanced cultural and personal visibility aspects that affect equitable involvement in society. By adapting this idea to a high school level, I could provide a platform for my students in which they were able to choose a topic they felt would promote the participation and voice of their generation within their community. To make it fully a social justice event however, and not just a themed concert, we would need to somehow engage in the five frames described by de Quadros (2019), which included choir demographics, programming decisions, and various forms of community engagement.

The Need for Care

A student-led social justice concert event revolving around a topic relevant within the community that included not just appropriate repertoire but also community engagement would also fulfill many of the tenets of CP, CRP, and CSP, but I would need to tread carefully; I did not want students to feel forced to disclose opinions or views they were not ready to reveal or consider the final product exploitive. The dialogic element I hoped to implement, which would hopefully lead to empowering student voice, would need to be founded on Care, incorporating trust, honesty, and vulnerability. I was already an advocate of care in the classroom, trying to not only incorporate it into my own teaching but also encourage care between and among my students. However, differentiating between the different forms of care and purposefully focusing on care would be an important condition of creating a safe space within which my students could

work (Hendricks, 2023). I would need to move beyond simple general caring, and instead work to embrace Care in all its complexities.

As I will discuss later in more detail, there are multiple types of care, all of which are important in teaching. In her writings, Noddings (2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017) distinguished between *caring about* and *caring for*, arguing that *caring about* was more focused on causes, settings, or populations whereas *caring for* was relational, personal, and individualized. Hendricks (2018, 2021a, 2023) promoted compassionate music teaching and later added *caring with*, a form of care that focused on the connectivity and relational care that can occur between equals, without the problems that arise from hierarchical power dynamics. In her discussion on compassion in music education, Hendricks (2018) discussed the importance of trust, which I felt was particularly relevant to my classroom due to the potential vulnerability exposed during discussions about song content, and the focus on unity and love within the close-knit school community overall. When discussing collective trust, she noted the interrelatedness between trust, collective efficacy, and group coordination (p. 35) – if this student-led social justice concert event were to be an empowering musical outreach for my students, I would need to encourage and safeguard trust in the classroom. For me, this all came back to Care; *caring about*, *for*, and *with* my students would hopefully establish the type of safety and trust needed for meaningful dialogue to occur.

With trust and dialogue, students might feel empowered, hopefully embracing their identities and transforming the world around them. It was through Caring that I might better implement many of the aspects of the diversity-focused theories I had

studied. Students could feel confident in diversifying repertoire and vocal styles in a more normalized and respectful manner as advocated by CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and CSP (Ladson-Billings, 2014, Paris & Alim, 2014). An environment permeated with various types of Care could also facilitate student sharing of stories, giving room for respectful valuing of stories as advocated by Chapman (2010), while avoiding some of the pitfalls over misuse of stories mentioned by Hess (2021).

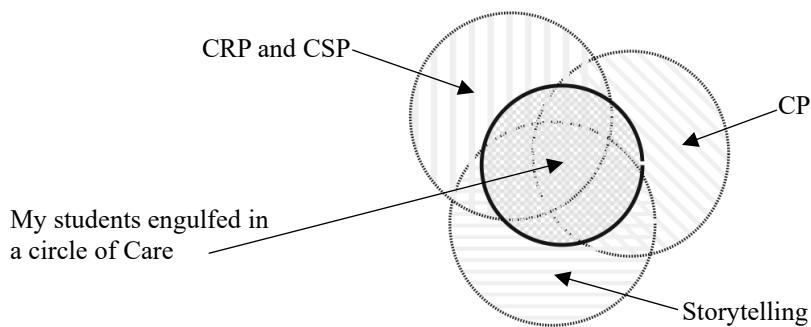
Care could also extend out into the surrounding communities and the broader world view of the students. Jorgensen (2023) noted the complexity of Care in the classroom, describing it as “go(ing) beyond formal subject matter” (Jorgensen, 2023, p. 22) to include the students, the community in which those students live, and the society around us all. Recognizing the power of such Care, music educators can have a considerable influence on their students. We have the power to silence student voices or amplify them, inspire collaboration or embattle musicians against one another, and focus on the perfect product or the authentic connections and learning processes. How we Care and the manner in which we Care could assist students in their journey and growth towards empowerment, helping them redefine the boundaries of the world around them and encouraging them to actively re-envision and reshape their own world as they applied their own version of CP (Freire, 1970) to their lives. Alternatively, lack of Care could encourage pedagogical practices that reinscribed harmful I-It relationships (Hess, 2021; Parker & Hutton, 2023), objectifying people while maintaining the Eurocentric, competitive, and product driven status-quo.

My earlier disjointed attempts were no longer disconnected. I realized that by

centering my interactions with my students in Care, the other theoretical lenses could potentially overlap and connect more with each other and with the diverse individuals in front of me. Figure 2 illustrates my new vision for my choir and my research.

Figure 2

Centering Student Interaction on Care and Its Potential Effects on Other Theoretical Lenses



A Social Justice Concert Event is Born

My research journey had reached a rest stop; I now had a potential means of addressing some of my concerns. I also now knew that I was not alone in my experiences, so perhaps my ideas could help someone else as well. I worked to implement a new style of teaching in my choral classroom, one based on care and dialogue, and my students did, indeed, work to produce a social justice concert event, which became one of the focal points for this dissertation. They chose “mental health” as their topic, and the resulting concert event featured numerous songs that depicted the students’ and society’s views on various mental health topics, along with student written reflections, PowerPoint slides, interactive lobby exhibits for audience members, a benefit element accepting donations for a local community service organization, and student volunteering with that

community service organization. A copy of the concert program (modified to protect confidentiality) can be found in Appendix A.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore audience members' and student participants' perceptions of a dialogue-based choral curriculum and caring teaching approach focused on student empowerment and social activism in music, and the resulting student-planned social justice benefit concert.

Research Questions

One primary research question and two secondary research questions guided my study. The primary research question focused on the meaningfulness and relevance of the concert event for both students and audience members.

- How do students and audience members experience meaningfulness and relevance of a student-led social justice concert that was the product of a dialogic choral project?

The secondary questions explored aspects of dialogic teaching with the students and the planning processes, specifically examining power dynamics and student goals.

- In what ways, if any, did students feel that the dialogic power dynamics between teacher and students affected the classroom and learning?
- In what ways, if any, did students feel that their goals for the project promoted student voice and empowerment through storytelling?

Defining Meaningfulness and Relevance

The terms meaningfulness and relevance are both prominent in my main research question, but they can be difficult to clearly explain. Examining standard dictionary definitions, meaningfulness is defined as “the quality of being useful, serious, or important” (Cambridge, 2025, Definition 1), whereas the term relevance is defined as “the degree to which something is related or useful to what is happening or being talked about” (Cambridge, 2025). These definitions provide a good start, but a more thorough examination of the words in educational and musical contexts can help better articulate their use in this dissertation.

Meaningfulness

Meaningfulness is not easily defined. One person may find something meaningful while another does not care about it at all, and two seemingly unrelated and disparate events can contain great meaning for a single person. Attempting to apply parameters for meaningfulness in music becomes even more difficult. Music meaning is affected by both musical and non-musical aspects, from the types of rhythms used or the words sung, to the music’s context and an individual’s personal history. For music educators, such varied descriptions and sources of meaningfulness can make creating meaningful music experiences in classrooms difficult.

During the late twentieth century, Hylton (1980) proposed that certain factors affected the meaningfulness of choir for singers, including communicative and integrative factors. Later researchers added to these categories of meaningfulness, revealing the multidimensionality of meaningfulness for choral participants. McKoy (2000)

acknowledged this multidimensionality through the use of sense of place as a theoretical framework for examining the perceptions of meaningfulness by adult community choir members, noting the strong bonds and presence forged by some of the adults within the community choir which contributed to their sense of meaningfulness. The research led McKoy (2000) to suggest the potential for positive effects in choirs if more emphasis was placed on process and place rather than product, thereby encouraging more connectivity amongst choir members and within choir curriculum.

More recent research into meaningfulness in music education, while not specifically focused on choral experiences, has embraced a more nuanced and philosophical view of meaning while still embracing the importance of connectivity. Discussing the views of several philosophers, Silverman (2013) noted that “meaningfulness is either too intangible or too challenging for the methodologies that some philosophers choose to apply” (p. 21), but there are connective elements that are present when something is considered meaningful. Expanding on Wolf’s (2010) writings, Silverman (2013) identified one of those elements as love, an active love in which one interacts with someone or something outside of themselves that is valuable.

Regarding the role of meaningfulness in music education, Silverman (2013) argued that “omitting to consider what makes life, music, and music education meaningful will surely limit music educators’ perceptions of the nature and values of our work” (p. 22) but identifying that in the classroom is complicated. Silverman (2013) emphasized connectivity in the process of music making; the value of people coming together to make music, the love and interaction involved in musicking, demonstrated

meaningfulness. That connectiveness of musicking together and the meaning that develops through that process were also mentioned by Smith and Lee (2025), who discussed the sense of family and friendship experienced during a DIY/DIWO² music project.

For my project, combining these ideas regarding meaningfulness with the concepts of Care expressed by Noddings (2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017) and Hendricks (2021a, 2023, 2025), provided a framework within which I could determine whether or not something was potentially meaningful. For example, data that were more focused on a form of relational caring were considered data that supported meaningfulness because the focus was more on love or connectivity between individuals or between an individual and an object of value. Students caring with each other through the musicking process or through the concert planning process made those processes meaningful. Students caring for others, or audience members caring for the students through their emotional connection to the music was meaningful. That meaningfulness data fell primarily into four categories: emotional connection (connectivity with another person or with an object of value), importance (determination of value based on connectivity and the resulting prominence), ownership (resulting from strong sense of love and connectivity), and personal engagement (chosen connectivity or love).

Relevance

There are many forms of relevance. Relevance can be deeply personal or more

² Defined as Do-It-Yourself and Do-It-With-Others, I chose to honor the authors' use of the abbreviations in the title of their article rather than writing out the terminology.

community driven. Some relevance carries great emotional weight, while other relevance is more mundane and practical. Some practices are relevant due to their historical significance while others are more focused on the future. In music classrooms, all of these forms of relevance can be embraced, but research has shown that they are often ignored.

Concern regarding the relevance of school music classes, and within education in general, has been a subject of music research for several decades. For some, it is the lack of personal relevance that is troubling. As already noted in this dissertation, Ladson-Billings (1995) expressed concern over the gap between school experiences and students' home and community lives. That gap was certainly mirrored in music classrooms. Concerns over cultural relevance and school music's connection to student lives continue to this day. Kelly-McHale and Abril (2015) noted the lack of relevance experienced by many Latinx youth due to the strong disconnect between school music and Latinx traditions. More recently, Newton et al. (2025) conducted a survey of students in the UK and found that many students did not feel that school music reflected real-life music, which affected their desire to enroll in various music courses. Those who did enroll found value in the coursework but not necessarily relevance. Newton et al. (2025) argued that "[the students'] perception of the importance of school music stemmed from improving musical knowledge rather than being transformative, creative, enriching, or relevant" (p. 11). Even though these students identified practical value in the music courses, they found little personal relevance.

For other music researchers, the environment and methodologies embraced in

school music limit the musical relevance of the programs. Regelski (2006, 2012) expressed concerns over musicianism and the inability of many school music ensembles to foster students' individual relationships with music. Such practices limit the potential relevance for students enrolled because they force the students to be totally dependent on the director, inhibiting their potential to pursue their own musical interests outside of the program. Other school music programs limit relevance by overemphasizing competitions. As mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation, numerous researchers have criticized the extreme competitiveness of many US school music ensembles (Abramo, 2017; Allsup, 2010; Hess, 2025; Mantie, 2024; Powell, 2023). This competitiveness can confine school music's relevance to an ensemble's ability to meet the standards of certain competitions, with little regard for other musical aesthetics, values, or purposes.

In addition to the above-mentioned forms of relevance, the relevance of music education in general has been contested for generations, with many concerned about the practical general relevance of studying music in school. As previously noted in this chapter, music education in the US was originally used, in part, to help create a certain type of citizen (Gustafson, 2008). While those views of society may be outdated, the extramusical benefits of music study are often still used as a justification for music education, pointing out the relevance of music study even for those not interested in pursuing music later in life. Examining neuro-psychological benefits, Iușcă (2022) noted the positive effects on brain development for those that studied music, noting the increase in brain function related to motor skills and visual tasks. Adopting a different approach, Swart (2020) discussed the perceptions of music study to increase discipline and

academic achievement in disadvantaged learners. Focusing on a different educational area, others have studied the connections between social emotional learning (SEL) and music, some even creating curriculum to help ensure the integration of SEL in music classes (Çenberci & Tufan, 2023; Chung, 2024; Cienki, 2023).

For my research, I applied notions of Care to the above forms of relevance. Relevance involves a certain element of *caring about* (Noddings, 2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017) because it deals with degrees of relatedness and connectedness to what is happening. Data that were more focused on caring about, thereby demonstrating primarily a connection to self, home, or community (personal, family, friends, or school) demonstrate personal relevance. Data that noted a strong connection to future potential benefits (education or career) demonstrate either musical relevance or extramusical relevance, depending on the topic and the person involved.

Research Design and Positionality

Through this research, I aimed to provide in-depth information and understanding of how a particular choral group and audience members responded to a care-based dialogic approach to choral education, specifically as it pertained to relevance, meaningfulness, social justice, and student voice. This made it ideal for qualitative case study research. It aligned with Stake's (1995) descriptions of the understandings sought for through case studies, exploring the relational and complex interactions within a specific group. The research also fits Cresswell and Poth's (2018) definition of a case study that explores "a real-life contemporary bounded system....through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (p. 96).

The bounded system for this study was my select, audition-only vocal Ensemble³ and the audience members who attended this particular concert. The students within that Ensemble were aged 14–18 years. They had all chosen to audition for the group, and I had selected the Ensemble members based on their audition, selecting singers that held their part well, had good musicianship skills (demonstrating an awareness of how rhythm, expressiveness, and ensemble singing worked together to produce music), and together encompassed a wide variety of voices and vocal timbres. They all sang with skill, demonstrating good vocal technique that included general lack of strain on the vocal cords in their natural singing style (some were more classical while others were more focused on pop and musical theater styles), expressive musicianship, and emotional engagement with the material, but only a few planned to pursue music in college. Most of them had other career interests that were more typical of the school's alumni: psychologists, teachers, engineers, lawyers, doctors, and other similar high-profile professions. However, they all professed to love singing and were heavily committed to the success of the group. Many of them had multiple classes together (in addition to Ensemble) and had known each other for several years.

Setting and Context

I will provide details regarding the site of my research in chapter 3. However, there are some aspects of context that warrant discussion in this first chapter. My work at

³ When referring to the idea of ensemble as a general concept, the word will be lowercase. However, when referring to the specific Ensemble group at Saint School that was used for this study, Ensemble will be capitalized to notate the group's specific identity without breaking confidentiality.

Saint School⁴, a private Augustinian college preparatory school in the midwestern United States, is colored by the strong sense of community encouraged and promoted within the school. The strong support I receive from the headmaster, the large attendance of parents at the choral concerts, the school's mission of holistic education, and the school's faith in their teachers (providing much needed teacher autonomy) all contribute to my ability to create the type of classroom I feel is best for my students. There is an intense connection between my teaching style, the theories I have discussed, and the purpose of this research. A discussion of my teaching style and personal history with music education will assist in providing a better understanding of my rationale for this study.

My History with Music Education

I first began my teaching career as a private piano instructor. I was young, and very inexperienced, but I tried to make conscious decisions about the type of teacher I wanted to be for my students. I began to realize how impactful my elementary general music teacher had been, with her infectious love of music and unwavering belief in her students' abilities. Likewise, the wisdom and love of my college piano professor became much clearer to me. While in college, many of us in my professor's piano studio joked about how our professor was half piano instructor and half therapist, but as an adult beginning to teach piano to others, I started to understand just how important all those conversations during lessons had been. I had been able to excel as a pianist because my professor saw me as more than just the sum of my musical abilities. During those early years as a piano instructor, when I began to establish my identity as a teacher, it was the

⁴ Pseudonyms are used throughout the dissertation to protect confidentiality.

memories of my experiences with those teachers that became my inspiration. I accepted the students that other teachers rejected, regardless of talent or special needs, because I felt that everyone was capable of learning music, and I wanted everyone to fall in love with music. I learned that I could not serve my students if I did not know them, so I took time to talk to them. That is when I discovered the joy of witnessing a student create a jazz improvisation based on a Rachmaninoff etude because that reflected his identity, or another student create an improvisation inspired by the latest Debussy piece she was learning. Those years of individualized instruction, small successes, and faltered attempts at “bucking the system” would lay the foundation for my later years as a choral instructor.

My Teaching Style in the Choral Classroom and Its Relation to Care

By the time I switched from being a private piano instructor to a high school choral director, I realized that I was a nontraditional instructor. As noted earlier, I began my choral teaching still clinging on to some of the choral traditions I had grown up with, but I quickly realized that those were not for me. They felt restrictive and forced, and my students could sense a falseness to my actions. I worked diligently to apply the same sort of individualized instruction I had implemented in my piano studio to my choral classroom. I thought back to those early years as an elementary student, all the different types of music, the high energy, and the unbridled passion for singing together. I knew that if I could capture the essence of those memories and combine them with my experience as a private piano instructor and my academic knowledge, I could come closer to establishing the type of choral classroom I wanted.

My teaching style has grown and evolved through the years, and I hope it will

continue to do so for years to come. I believe in being appropriately relational and I now work to actively *care with* my students, creating a professional yet relaxed atmosphere that encourages conversation. I focus on helping my students understand the potential meaning and significance of the music they learn, as well as gain an appreciation for practicing and performing music. I try to connect with my students in a meaningful way to be not only a good choral teacher but a good mentor, and this is especially true within my select Ensemble class. When asked by my administration to write my “Everest statement” (the big picture goal I wanted to accomplish with my students), I wrote “I want every student in my classroom to find a meaningful place for music in their lives and understand how music affects the society in which they live.” I cannot accomplish that goal without getting to know my students. My evolution to this point was informed largely by the knowledge I gained through my various graduate studies.

Interestingly enough, it was not until my master’s degree in education that I was introduced to the idea of “authentic connection” by Gay (2018). It was a shock to realize that what I had been trying to establish all those years with my students had a formal name. By the time I was working on my doctoral degree and encountered research on Care, I had moved from shock to excitement. I was no longer alone in my quest. Other music teachers in my state might ridicule my teaching choices, but in the broader music education circle, the relational aspects and individualized care I had been working to implement in my teaching was being studied and promoted by other music educators as well. Instead of creating everything on my own through trial and error or instinct, I now had resources.

I discovered that Care, in one form or another, had been studied for quite some time, but it was not until recently that the nuance and power of care in music education had been researched and discussed. Buber (1970, as cited in Hendricks, 2023) argued for the importance of I-Thou relationships over I-It connections. It was through seeing each other as subjects or persons, not objects, that genuine connections could be made, something Gay (2018) would refer to as an authentic connection when discussing culturally responsive teaching in general education. When one person viewed another human as an object to be controlled, an I-It relationship was formed. Such objectifying relationships were not mutually beneficial. Hess (2021) would later discuss the problematic nature of I-It relationships when describing the potential misuse of storytelling. This differentiation between I-It and I-Thou relationships provided the foundation for later study in care.

Gilligan (1982, as cited in Hendricks, 2023), pointed out the problematic nature of viewing care through a male perspective, which led to other explorations in the subject. Noddings (1992) expanded upon Buber's work from a feminist perspective, identifying different types of care, about which she would write extensively (Noddings, 2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017). For both Noddings and Gilligan, the importance of care was in responding to the needs of others, not in fulfilling a broader ethical or moral obligation. Such responding and connecting had the potential to greatly impact education.

Noddings (2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017) distinguished between two types of care: *caring about* and *caring for*. She identified *caring about* as impersonal and detached, more of an I-It relationship than I-Thou. *Caring about* is important, but it is

only the beginning of the journey, not the final destination. Teachers *care about* their subjects, people may *care about* problems in far off places, but without personal connection or a relationship of some sort, *caring about* does not necessarily produce any action. The feelings of care are directed at an impersonalized object. Many product-driven teaching practices in music education can feel like intense *caring-about* interactions. My experiences with my high school piano teacher provide an example, as do some of my earlier teaching mistakes. When the perfect performance is the ultimate goal, regardless of the well-being of the student(s) involved, the teacher sends the message that she *cares about* the performance more than she *cares for* the student. Competitive choirs can be environments heavily reliant on *caring about* specific standards rather than *caring for* individual students, a result of the often “authoritarian pedagogical practices” and specific standards established within competitive choirs (Turner, 2024).

Caring for, on the other hand, is relational and personal, with specific roles fulfilled by both the carer and the cared for (Noddings, 2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017). Noddings (2012) argued that the carer must be receptive and attentive, discovering the needs of another rather than presuming to know them. Once care has been given, the cared-for must acknowledge that the care has been received. The relational nature of *caring for* expressed by Noddings is a more nuanced description of the dialogic aspect of care proposed by Buber — both emphasize the mutual connection and relationship between people. My college piano professor had *cared for* me, hence my meaningful memories of my lessons with him. Some of my best interactions with my own students

were due to me *caring for* them rather than just *caring about* the music, I simply had not been able to verbalize it at the time.

Building on the importance of care and dialogue but expanding into areas of student empowerment and trust, Hendricks (2018) called for compassion in music education, promoting a definition of compassion that focused on experience sharing “between equals” (p. 5), not pity or weakness. I will discuss them more later, but her work described the areas I had been working on in my own teaching: trust, empathy, patience, inclusion, community, and authentic connection (Hendricks, 2018).

Emphasizing the importance of critiquing power dynamics and becoming co-learners with our students, Hendricks (2023, 2025) later added an additional category of care, *caring with*. Providing an alternative to the top-down approach common in US music classrooms, Hendricks (2023, 2025) encouraged music educators to *care with* their students in a collaborative and cooperative manner that placed equal value on both parties involved. The student-centered approaches promoted by Hendricks (2025) and fundamental to *caring with*, which focused on student strengths, affirmation of student worth, and students and teachers learning together, had very similar goals as my own as yet to be achieved teaching aspirations.

As faculty at Saint School, we are encouraged to have genuine moments of connection with every student we teach. I will admit that for my general chorus this can be a bit of a struggle. They are larger classes, and some students are naturally more outgoing, so I have a lot of those connective moments with those bolder students, while I may only experience one or two connective moments in a semester with the other

students who are quieter. With my select Ensemble though, those moments of connection occur much more frequently, often every week with every student. Using my research to describe how I teach, I would suggest that with my select Ensemble, I *care about* (Noddings, 2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017) the concerts, I *care for* (Noddings, 2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017) each individual student, and I try to *care with* (Hendricks, 2021a, 2023, 2025) them about music and the world they inhabit.

Rationale and Significance

Scholars have presented various possibilities for activist-minded music activities that could positively impact communities (Bartleet & Higgins, 2018; Cohen & Silverman, 2013; de Quadros, 2015, 2019; de Quadros & Amrein, 2023), yet few seem to make it into educational settings. DeLorenzo et al. (2019) wrote of the transforming power of music, but there is a noted lack of exploration in that area within US music classrooms. Hess (2017b) described people's continuing "intent to stay unaware or disinterested in world events and the systems that shape our society" (p. 19) as *terminal naivety*, a term she adapted from Vaugeois (2013), who used it to depict the individualistic and self-serving trend in classical music to ignore society, including any potential colonialism or other political ramifications of classical music instruction or performance. Such a term seems an apt description for US choral education, so steeped in tradition that it has gone fundamentally unchanged for generations. Many of these well-kept traditions are exclusionary, determined not by worth but by power. Ensembles, primarily Eurocentric in nature, have continued to monopolize many music education classrooms and their elitest nature has excluded many students, inducing Regelski (2006)

to question their relevance and meaningfulness. With a focus on product, these ensembles do not always meet the educational needs of the students involved.

Regelski (2012) argued that music education should contribute to the “musical well-being of students and society” (p.14) and that duty ethics dictate that teachers should “do no harm” to their students (p. 13) which should specifically include both physical safety and psychological safety. Unfortunately, research indicates that many students actually do experience some form of harm during their music learning journeys. The prevalence of competitions in music education is explored elsewhere, but it is important to note here that the benefits of competitions do not necessarily outweigh the harms. In her research on musicians/music educators with mental health concerns, Hess (2024) reported that most of the participants “experienced competition in music education as harmful to their emotional wellbeing” (p, 147). Hess (2024) also reported on the damage caused by expectations of perfection in high stakes performing and the resulting lack of validation for hard work and effort felt by students spending hundreds of hours in the practice room. Reports of abusive teachers and directors, students crying in rehearsals, and other such distressing situations are a far cry from Regelski’s (2012) aforementioned charge. Even without such abuse and pressure, the continued dominance of Western canon and Eurocentric traditions marginalizes diverse students and reinscribes power inequalities, affecting the identity formation and self-perception of those students and further Othering them from the students around them. Countryman (2009) expressed similar ethical concerns, stating that teachers have a “professional obligation to provide intellectually honest music programs that are personally and communally enriching”

which includes an “ethical responsibility towards social consciousness, power, privilege, and equity” (p. 24). Care, critical pedagogy, storytelling, student empowerment, and social justice programming could all work to address such issues.

Many theories and practices have emerged that have attempted to diversify music and promote more socially conscious teaching in US music classrooms, including culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014) and critical pedagogy (CP) (Freire, 1970). I will discuss these in more detail in my literature review, but as I will note, although each has brought a unique and valuable piece to the overall picture of music pedagogy, practical applications of practices inspired by these theories have also fallen short. Storytelling and counterstories, considered valuable knowledge in critical race theory (Chapman, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) have also been explored by some music educators in limited areas. De Quadros and Amrein (2023) were able to implement storytelling and narrative successfully in some community choral experiences, but there is little evidence of that same success in US choral classrooms.

As I noted earlier, there has been a surge in research regarding the importance of Care in the classroom. It is possible that Care, in all its forms, is the key to enacting change in choral classrooms. Care could help teachers become aware of the potential harmful effects of certain modes of instruction and offer an avenue for implementing other pedagogical methods to address and prevent those harms. That awareness comes, in part, due to dialogue. According to Noddings (2002), “dialogue is the most fundamental component of the care model” (p. 16). It is open-ended and requires that both parties

listen. The focus is not on the topic but rather on the relationship between the people speaking. Noddings (2002) described the participants in dialogue as being “aware of each other; they take turns as carer and cared-for, and they....reach across the ideological gap to connect with each other” (p. 17). Dialogue and Care are linked, but I would argue it is bidirectional. Dialogue may be fundamental to Care, but Care is also fundamental to meaningful dialogue.

Listening is also an important part of dialogue. When calling for compassionate music teaching, Hendricks (2018) noted the importance of listening to our students and building trust. She later elaborated on that listening and trust, advocating for “a more empowering conceptualization of care in music education” that involved “sharing – sharing experience, sharing passion, sharing excitement, sharing music-learning goals, and sharing humanness (Hendricks, 2023, p. 7). Such sharing can only happen when teachers *care for* and, eventually *with*, their students.

Care-full listening as part of critically minded dialogue can embolden empowering and inclusive pedagogy. Lewis (2020) described dialogic pedagogy as “hearing and embracing the personal narratives of the students and integrating them into the learning process” (p. 59). Dialogic pedagogy can allow music teachers to listen to student stories and counterstories. One form of dialogic pedagogy in music education is dialogic listening. Bylica (2023) argued for dialogic listening as a means of exploring multiple interpretations and perspectives. Such explorations encourage personal growth and communion between those involved as they interpret self and others through different lenses. Bylica (2023) pointed out the connection with care in such an exercise, “listening

in order to be *with* another through words or music can be conceived as an act of care [but]...care becomes *radical* [when] listening creates opportunity for authorial agency” (p. 484, emphasis in original). Through those stories, perspectives, interpretations, and new self-knowledge, students and teachers can learn more about each other and the community in which they live. The increase in community and cultural knowledge the students gained would also naturally inspire aspects of the various diversity-focused and critically-minded pedagogies that teachers have attempted to implement.

This research was my attempt to apply these various ideas, methodologies, and theories in my own creative way to develop a dialogic choral teaching approach infused with Care. Within my approach, I embedded elements of CRP, CSP, CP, and storytelling, ultimately striving to make a space for student empowerment and give voice to student stories and identity expression. This dialogic and Care-based teaching approach impacted both my teaching style and the curriculum overall, culminating in a student-planned social justice concert event. This research could provide a model for other teachers who wish to explore Care in the music classroom, student-planned concerts, and student empowerment in choral classrooms. It also provides an example of a different type of choral teaching and concert, one that is more dialogic and less monologic, with room for varied implementations of diversity and student empowerment elements. In addition, the research presents an example of teaching methodology and performance practices that allow students to grow in social activism surrounding a topic of their choosing, thereby potentially increasing the meaningfulness and relevance of the experience overall.

Chapter 2: An Exploration of Moving from One Dominating and Monologic Voice to a Collaborative and Empowered Polyphony: A Literature Review Examining Choral Practices in the US

The most recent US Census shows a population more diverse than ever before (United States Census Bureau, 2020) with a significant increase in non-White populations. The Hispanic population in particular has grown significantly, showing a growth of 23% since the 2010 census (Jones et al., 2021), but the biggest change was in the multiracial population. Changes in reporting resulted in a more specific and accurate representation of the multiracial composition of the US population. This new method of reporting showed a drastic increase in those who consider themselves multiracial, increasing from 2.9% of the population in 2010 to approximately 10.2% of the population in 2020, a growth from roughly 9 million people to 33.8 million people (Jones et al., 2021). The White-alone population declined by 8.6% between the years 2010 and 2020 (Jones et al., 2021). This increase in ethnic and racial diversity means that US schools are filled with a more diversified student body, containing students who embrace varying cultural customs and musics. Most arts education programs within US schools, however, continue to promote a primarily monocultural view of art dominated by Whiteness and Eurocentricity, with a call for diversity that wamwa Mwanga (2025) calls a new form of “sonic colonialism” (p. 13). Thus, rather than adjusting and adapting to fit the needs of an ever-growing diversified student population, many US music classrooms promote a single and narrow view of music.

US Music Education: One Perspective Over Many Voices

In her well-known Ted Talk, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) warned listeners of the “danger(s) of a single story,” the perils of viewing different peoples and cultures in the world from a singular and narrow perspective. Unfortunately, research suggests most music classes in the United States today do just that. They are often monologic, telling a single story that is dominated by a view of music and music education based on Western European traditions. Many music teachers privilege Eurocentric musical ideals, still comportment (while singing), and notation-based learning, resulting in the dismissal or othering of non-Western European classical aesthetics and ideals (Gustafson, 2008; Hess, 2018a; Kelly-McHale & Abril, 2015). This single story is part of the history of US music education. Originally used, in part, to help produce obedient, reasonable, and upright citizens (Gustafson, 2008), the music in US schools was not originally intended to be inclusive. Regelski (2006) argued that music education’s original purpose revolved more around spreading specific cultural standards and training the future ruling classes and leaders in society. Society has since changed and the role of music and music education within that society has become more complex, but many aspects of music education have remained the same.

Diversified Populations in Eurocentric Music Classrooms

Despite the diverse student population, many arts teachers struggle to find room in their lesson plans for arts from different cultures and belief systems due, in part, to the way fine art is defined. Many teachers dismiss art forms they deem as lower or less sophisticated, which in music, results in choosing to embrace Eurocentric musics they

categorize as meeting the standards of fine art or high-quality music (DeLorenzo, 2016; Kelly-McHale & Abril, 2015). For something to be considered fine art (visually, theatrically, or musically) it often has to meet the social and cultural requirements set forth by those in power, ultimately resulting in a type of White ownership and control of the arts (Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2018).

Musically, the effects of such ownership and control create a hierarchy. Similar to Schmidt's (2017) and Smith et al.'s (2022) observations regarding the effect of musical policy noted in Chapter 1, such hierarchical categorization relegates popular music and music from other cultures or backgrounds to a lower ranking. That hierarchy then provides teachers with a justification for continuing Eurocentricity in their classrooms, allowing for the dismissal, marginalization, diminishment, or complete absence of non-Eurocentric music in their teaching. Remarking on formal music education, Hess (2018a) also noted such marginalization of non-European classical musical experiences and bias towards Whiteness. Benedict (2006) claimed that such Eurocentricity extended to educational standards as well; standards that evaluated behavior more than musical knowledge and accomplishments in order to promote certain attitudes, conventions, and types of actions.

Ensembles in US Schools: Reinforcing the Hegemony

Within US schools, ensembles can encourage exclusivity with their strict requirements for membership and regimented rehearsal and performance protocols, but they continue to dominate music education (Mantie & Tucker, 2012). Regelski (2006) questioned the educational purpose of such groups musically, arguing that ensemble

members often do not develop individual personal musicianship skills due to their over-reliance on directors and teachers to interpret the music. The elitism and hierarchical attitude of many ensembles is often increased by their competitive nature, an aspect of music education that is historically and socially entrenched in music classrooms and programs even though the competitions may not always benefit the students who participate (Abramo, 2017; Allsup, 2010; Hess, 2024; Mantie, 2024; Powell, 2023). That competitiveness has become part of the cyclical and hegemonic teaching practices commonly found in US music classrooms, with many music educators viewing competition as a necessary and constant aspect of their program. In many cases, levels of success or achievement at competitions become the standards by which successful music programs are assessed (Mantie, 2024; Powell, 2023). When competitions become the sole measure of a program's success, collaborative and creative learning is often hindered (Kohn, 1992). Parents, school board members, administrators, and professional educator groups often choose to suppress individual student identities and expressions of musicality that do not conform to the competition ideology. Educators with such a mindset can ignore other educational opportunities for students, choosing instead to perfect a few pieces of Eurocentric music in order to achieve the best trophy or rating.

The one-sided obsessive focus on competitions poses a danger to music education by encouraging teachers to ignore the needs of the students they teach in favor of potentially achieving a musical product deemed appropriately worthy by competition judges. In 2012, Regelski warned of a similar danger, noting that music education in American schools was often dominated by a type of *musicianism*, which he defined as a

“tendency to place *musical* choices and values before or above *educational* options and values” (p. 21, emphasis in original). Such musicianism, according to Regelski (2012), presents ethical problems because it often sacrifices the education of individual students for the perfect performance of socially accepted academic music. This creates a system of institutionalized music education that is inherently problematic, as Regelski (2012) further explained,

It risks being *hegemonic* because music teachers are in positions of authority to dictate everything from the music deemed suitable for inclusion to its interpretation. It risks being *dogmatic* by insinuating that the music offered by school music programs is somehow more special or otherwise more important than music outside the school, thus deliberately excluding other musics. It is *self-serving* to the degree that the musical requirements of the program or needs of the teacher are served, not those of individual students and society. And the *authority*, traditions, and for-granted aesthetic theories enshrined by traditional music theory and history texts.....are for the most part transported or translated to school music. (p. 23, emphasis in original)

In his quote, Regelski (2012) mentioned the risk of hegemony and dogma, but I would argue that hegemony and dogma are already fully entrenched within the US music education system. Regelski’s risks are currently a reality, and the self-serving nature of music education continues to grant authority to the same traditions and aesthetics that have dominated US choral programs for generations.

As my reflections in Chapter 1 indicate, my own experiences document many of

the worries raised by Regelski. The hegemonic and authoritarian concerns noted by Regelski were found in my own piano, choral, and orchestral high school experiences, and they continue to be perpetuated in schools today through policy, a point argued by Smith et al. (2022). The dogma of US school music programs is found in its reverence for the Western Canon, illustrated through my own personal experiences as a student whose teachers either did not deem non-classical music worthy of study or were restricted by schools in their ability to devote time to such non-sanctioned music, and my experiences as a teacher whose diversity of teaching repertoire has been criticized by colleagues from other schools. Wamwa Mwanga's (2025) ideas on musical canonicity, discussed in Chapter 1, reflect a similar type of dogma. My own experiences as a student reflect the self-serving aspects of music education, an aspect reinforced by Powell (2023) in his discussions about the power of competitions and by Smith et al. (2022) in their writings about the industry of music education. These aspects of music education, the dogmatic, hegemonic, and authoritarian practices that are often self-serving, do not adequately serve and educate all students. DeLorenzo et al. (2019) pointed out the marginalization of students that can occur when school music emphasizes certain musical tastes, performance practices, and experiences, while dismissing other musics and practices. As a music educator, every decision regarding repertoire, musical interpretation, and music instruction can have the ability to include or silence individual students; a single dominating and narrow narrative of music in a classroom filled with diverse individuals can potentially silence many voices and marginalize the cultures, aesthetics, and interests the students bring with them into the classroom space.

US Choir: The Elite

Examining choir, Mantie and Tucker (2012) noted its exclusionary nature, and Bradley (2006) called choir a “Western construct” (p. 13). As noted in Chapter 1, de Quadros (2019) identified various Eurocentric components that typically define a choir or chorus in the US. These practices include the separation of the conductor from the singers, the formality of the warm-up practices and other rehearsal processes, the prerequisite knowledge required for participation, the performance of fully pre-written and harmonized music, and the general performance practices that separate the performers from the audience. Regelski (2012) suggested that institutionalized music education risked being hegemonic, but de Quadros (2019) noted practices that suggest that such hegemony already exists, formalities of US choral practices ingrained in US choral identity that are so different from group singing practices in most non-European countries. These practices tend to dominate the character and function of the US choir concept through a dictatorial hierarchy that leaves little room for individual voice, variation, otherness, or identity formation. My own experiences resonate with such claims. All of my high school choral experiences as a student were rigid and formal, following the long-standing traditions of sightreading, formal warm-ups to begin each rehearsal, classical vocal technique, prevalent use of WSMN at the expense of other aural practices, and a strong separation between the audience and the performers. As a teacher, my attempts to change some of those aspects have been slow and only partially successful. It is ironic that as an individual outside of my classroom, I champion empowerment and equity, yet I teach a subject engulfed in Eurocentric, dictatorial, and

elitist practices. I monitor my teaching practices carefully, ensuring that I make conscious choices to avoid perpetuating a paradigm with which I do not agree, even if those choices do not always align with the teacher training I received.

Fortunately, choir does not have to exist in such an elitist, exclusionary, and rigid manner. De Quadros (2015) pointed out that choral programs can be elite or inclusive, continuing to primarily promote Eurocentric and hegemonic practices, or advocating justice and self-expression. His later writings offer evidence of community outreach approaches to choral music that are different, community music programs that are more collaborative and inclusive, with different repertoire and different goals (de Quadros, 2019). Many community programs often advocate for a specific type of justice or identity and then work to be inclusive within that specific ideal, quite a contrast from many school music programs. The ideals of justice within community music programs would have to be adapted if they were to fit within the school music model.

The existing school music model that is prevalent in many US classrooms, with its standards, performances, and competitions, appears to have little room for justice. Admittedly, even the idea of justice is difficult to pin down in education, with varying definitions and ideas regarding what constitutes appropriate social justice, equity, and social change in a classroom. Johanssen (2024) asserted that “education functions as a social change agent or instrument, be it deliberately or not” (p. 17), and Bylica and Schmidt (2024) argued that school was “a political site” (p. 36). These ideas suggest that whether music educators accept it or not, what they do is political. They are part of that social instrument within education, moving back and forth on a continuum that leads

forwards towards inclusivity or backwards towards hegemony. Viewed in this way, maintaining the status quo of Eurocentricity and exclusivity will likely result in music education being left behind while the rest of society moves forward, but determining what types of social justice and social change can and should be implemented in a music classroom, or what constitutes equity in music education, can be difficult. DeLorenzo et al. (2019) focused on the aspect of social justice that encourages embracing all of humanity. I will address other definitions and nuances of social justice later in this literature review, but it is important to note that foundationally, as agents of change, music educators have the ability to embrace a form of justice that promotes valuing all human life instead of choosing to remain part of the elite where more value is placed on the views of some while marginalizing, diminishing, or silencing all those who are different.

The Existing Components of Choir in US Schools

Typically, school choral programs in the United States have relied heavily on Western European repertoire (de Quadros, 2019; Hess, 2018a). Primarily classical in nature but with elements of European and American folk songs included as well, these works are typically presented using Western Standard Music Notation (WSMN). The problematic overreliance on WSMN was discussed by Kivijärvi and Väkevä (2020). They argued that such reliance inhibited intuitive musical responses in students and discouraged performer freedom. A routine of adhering strictly to what is written on the page, without the development of personal musical interpretations, improvisatory skills, or advanced aural skills denies students important musical experiences, shutting the doors

on potential opportunities and reinforcing the supremacy of written notation (Kivijärvi & Väkevä, 2020).

Hess (2018a) similarly expounded on the limited aurality often found in US choral classrooms, arguing that simplified rote learning was not the same as complex aurality, and the informal aspect of learning by ear through participation found in many other cultures and musics was lost in notation-based formal learning. Kivijärvi and Väkevä (2020) further discussed this hegemony, noting that WSMN is not needed for music transmission in many non-European cultures where aurality is common, where elaborate call and response music, engaging and difficult harmonies created by ear, and complex improvisation all exist without written notation. According to the authors, over-reliance on WSMN can present students with hierarchical and false ideas regarding such aurally transmitted musics, sending students the message that such music is less complex, less worthy, and less important than music written using WSMN. Offering a different elaboration upon this hegemonic hierarchy, Benedict et al. (2015) applied educational philosopher Jane Roland Martin's idea of cultural wealth to music education. Benedict et al. (2015) noted that legitimate musical knowledge is narrowly defined in music education, with Western classical music established as the exemplar against which all other types of music are valued, which "intimidates children who lack the proper cultural capital while allowing teachers to ignore much of the wealth of music that exists in the world" (p. xii). In such scenarios, WSMN is a tool for assimilation, not learning.

Awareness of these hegemonic practices and acknowledgement of the resulting inequity have led some to challenge traditional music education's current relevance.

Regelski (2006) spoke of the risk of music education becoming a museum relic instead of a living, thriving entity, and Allsup (2010) argued that responsible repertoire should examine living tradition, not just reinforce age-old hegemony. As noted in Chapter 1, research has shown that the traditional Western canon presents numerous drawbacks for students in today's diverse classrooms. Hendricks (2021b) postulated that musical gatekeepers in music education restrict the opportunities of those who do not conform to the Western European classical aesthetics habitually embraced in US choral classrooms. If we, as music educators, are part of the instruments of change noted by Johanssen (2024), then our part in that musical gatekeeping must be examined. If classical music is positioned as the pinnacle of aesthetics in music classrooms and WSMN is placed as the standard by which all music is learned, then music teachers choose, whether purposely or passively, to continue playing the role of gatekeeper – a role that reinforces the elitism that marginalizes musics from other backgrounds, devalues different perspectives, and fails to encourage the participation of all students.

Attempts at Transformation

As mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, attempts to diversify choral repertoire and teaching practices in music classrooms in the US have been inconsistent. While some researchers have developed practices specifically geared towards music education, others have looked toward diversity-oriented practices in other areas of education for inspiration. Through *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP), Ladson-Billings (1995) challenged teachers to make their classrooms less Eurocentric by embracing a variety of tenets, utilizing texts (in music contexts: programming repertoire) that reflected the

individual students and cultures found within their classrooms and increasing connections between home, community, and school. Unfortunately, many attempts to implement CRP lacked depth, demonstrated a superficial or stereotyped understanding of the culture behind the music, or were additive in nature (Kelly-McHale, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Young 2010). Hoping to combat the superficiality of CRP and other attempts at diversifying classrooms, Paris and Alim (2014, 2017) and Ladson-Billings (2014) offered *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (CSP) through which they expanded and refined the CRP tenets, advocating for an expanded mindset and ideology. They strove to promote depth and non-hierarchical understanding over additive and exploitive surface level implementations. Applying CSP as a theoretical framework, Good-Perkins (2022) argued that music educators needed to embrace a “threefold approach” comprised of “(1) dismantling, (2) expanding, and (3) embracing” (p. 140). By dismantling hegemonic practices that uphold age-old privileges, expanding and redefining the accepted definitions of what constitutes good music or appropriate musicking, and embracing multiple musical epistemologies, Good-Perkins (2022) posited that music classrooms could become a “homeplace” for students in which they find their “cultural centeredness” (p. 148).

Despite the call to dismantle hegemonic practices, changes are not always easily implemented. As I noted in Chapter 1, music education training in the US is cyclical (DeLorenzo, 2016), with many music educators rewarded for teaching in the same manner in which they were taught. Traditions, teaching practices, and repertoire, regardless of quality and applicability, are repeated generation after generation because

they are encouraged in competitions, are well-respected, and fit nicely into the already established system. Further, lack of exposure to diverse musics in teacher training sanctions a continued avoidance of non-Eurocentric musical exploration in classrooms, and lack of care and awareness regarding the sensitivities of such hegemonic practices can also create problems such as those noted by Hess (2018b, 2021), who found that some teachers, many of them well-intended, exploited student stories and perspectives in their attempts to promote student voice and individual expression. Additionally, Shaw (2016) found that even if implemented well, a single isolated incidence of culturally relevant pedagogy was simply not enough to make a sustained impact on students.

Although developed for educational use vastly different from US music classrooms, Freire's (1970) *critical pedagogy* (CP) presents another perspective on the need for diversified teaching that can empower students. Freire (1970) discouraged the typical banking system of education where knowledge is deposited in passive students by all-knowing teachers and instead promoted the idea of students and teachers working together to build knowledge, ultimately empowering students to create their own opportunities for freedom and self-reliance. Abrahams (2005, 2017) offered ideas for implementing CP in music classrooms, outlining five tenets for application in music education: teachers and students should approach learning and problem solving together through conversation and dialogue, teaching should expand students' views of the world around them, teaching should be empowering for students, transformation should be a key component of the educational process, and the inherent politics and power dynamics within teaching should be acknowledged and shifted to value the knowledge students

bring with them.

While Abrahams (2017) noted some successful CP implementations in music classrooms through use of reciprocal teaching and varying rehearsal strategies, success does not yet appear to be widespread. This could be due to a lack of knowledge and comfort by music teachers. Criticality in the classroom is fraught with difficulties, not the least of which is defining justice. In a survey of music teacher educators, Salvador and Kelly-McHale (2017) found that respondents did not even agree on a definition of social justice, much less whether or not it should be included in music classrooms. As I mentioned earlier, I, too, struggled to define social justice in a manner appropriate for my classroom. Young (2010) also noted the lack of teacher knowledge in this area, finding confusion regarding sociopolitical consciousness and difficulties in confronting personal bias among music educators. If teachers are unable to make an informed and reflective shift in their music classrooms, choral educators will likely struggle to develop programs that honestly reflect the deeply diversified and nuanced perspectives found amongst students in US schools.

It is important to note, however, that it is not just the choral repertoire and rehearsal methods that need to evolve. In his discussion on the “new normal in the choral world,” de Quadros (2019), wrote that “choral music [was] reshaping itself, reimagining and building new repertoires, purposes, and societal connections” (p. 34–35). Given the historical purpose of school music and classical music’s traditional connection to the social elite, such a charge seems difficult to apply to school choral programs. The potential of a school choral program, entrenched in the United States educational system,

to become part of that new normal is yet to be explored. Hopefully this research will shed some light on that potential, but if school choir is to evolve to that level, a metamorphosis of school choir's purpose and connection with society must also occur.

School Choir: Finding New Purposes and Places in Society

As noted, school music's original purposes of training future citizens (Gustafson, 2008) and maintaining specific cultural standards (Regelski, 2006) are reflected in the classroom environment of many school choirs. Rigid conformity to the "behavioral objectives" of the national music standards (Benedict, 2006, p. 19) and forced still comportment while singing (Gustafson, 2008) or separation of the voice from the body that denies the inherent connections between music, singing, and body movement (Perkins, 2018) both demonstrate such ideals. The measure of success of US school choir programs communicates a similarly rigid value system, quite different from that of other cultures.

When examining choral groups from various countries across the globe, de Quadros (2019) noted that many cultures embrace collaboration, choosing to create collaborative choral environments instead of the competitive hierarchy typical in US choirs. Kelly-McHale and Abril (2015) also referenced the negativity of competition for certain cultural groups, specifically noting the preference for collaborative environments among Latinx youth. Despite this, many choral directors in US schools continue to embrace the contest and competition traditions of American choir (Allsup, 2010). Students participate in contests of varying types, both as individuals and in groups, striving to receive a top rating or a first-place trophy. Meanwhile, schools send their

choirs to yearly competitions sponsored by various professional organizations in hopes of establishing a choir with a winning reputation. Choirs who continually bring back sweepstakes trophies often receive extra publicity and prestige at their school as well as better funding. Unfortunately, that competition environment bleeds through into other areas of music study. Powell (2023) noted that competitiveness permeated almost every aspect of most US music classrooms. Singers may work as a group to achieve a specific blend or choral sound, but such collaboration often resides only at surface level, with individual singers pitted against one another during rehearsals for the honor of singing the featured solo or holding the coveted section leader spot. As choir members (both individually and collectively) strive to achieve those various accolades, they often find themselves rewarded for producing the right sound or singing in a specific style. Those ideals of the successful choral sound are also rooted in Western European tradition, with many choirs demonstrating a dismissive ignorance of other vocal styles and colors (Perkins, 2018).

Comparisons and Contrasts Between School Music and Community Music

School music's place in society has traditionally been quite different from the socially conscious and involved community choirs mentioned by de Quadros (2019). Bartleet and Higgins (2018) discussed many of the attributes of community music, noting the collaboration, inclusivity, and self-expression common in many community music groups. They suggested that much of the learning in these groups utilized a "bottom-up rather than top-down approach" (p. 3), quite different from the strong director approach often used in schools.

The focuses and goals of community music are also different. Bartleet and Higgins (2018) argued that in many community music groups, “the personal and social engagement and growth of participants is as important as their musical engagement and growth” (p. 9). Inclusivity within community music is important, and community music groups often work to specifically include marginalized groups or make change in the world around them (Bartleet & Higgins, 2018; Veblen, 2013). Drawing on Dykema’s 1916 definition of community music, Veblen (2013) elaborated on this, discussing the social factor of community music and its numerous components that affect its members and the community in which they reside, including the ideas of healing, group solidarity, bonding, and identity.

Research presents numerous examples of this social factor. When examining community choirs in the US, Avery et al. (2013) noted that most community choirs had some sort of mission statement, formal or informal, tied to their identity and purpose. These statements often reflect a love of music, a welcoming atmosphere, and a goal for the group’s place in the wider community. Specific examples of community music groups offer a wide range of participatory, interventionist, political, and therapeutic purposes. Kleber et al. (2013) emphasized this through their discussion of the social capital of community music groups. Some groups focus on specific cultural musical practices, encouraging multi-generational participation.

I discuss the outreach and social justice related community music practices described and implemented by de Quadros and Amrein (2023) elsewhere in this dissertation, but there are numerous other examples that illustrate other activist purposes

and functions of community music. Avery et al. (2013) discussed the Gay and Lesbian Association Choruses (GALA Choruses), with their political aim and work towards social reform. Cohen and Silverman (2013) explored a different type of reform intended to “restore and build community” called “restorative practice” (p. 243). They provided an example of this practice through discussion of a prison community choir that included both incarcerated and non-incarcerated individuals. Cohen and Silverman (2013) also offered examples of more interventionist community music groups, such as music performed in homeless shelters and therapeutic community music practices, including a music therapy program offered at a psychiatric hospital. All of these examples demonstrate music groups that are purposeful, inclusive, collaborative, and directly involved in the communities in which they reside.

By contrast, many school music experiences are set apart and isolated from outside music experiences, the communities in which the students live, and the cultures those students embrace socially and personally. Examining such cultural isolation, Ladson-Billings (1995) noticed this disconnect years ago. She attempted to address it through CRP, encouraging educators to use members of the surrounding community as culture bearers to help bridge the gap between school and community and assist in teaching various cultural musics and practices, but such suggestions remain largely underutilized.

Many years after the introduction of CRP, Regelski (2012) denounced the isolation of school music from a philosophical perspective, arguing that music education created an “*institution* of music as an island of (supposed) musical virtue set off from the

(supposed) banality of the at-large music world” (p. 22, emphasis in original). Examining musical identity, Kelly-McHale (2013) also asserted that the classroom musician was isolated from the outside world. The persistence of the issue prompted continued suggestions from multiple theoretical perspectives.

Dekaney and Robinson’s (2014) research into the culture and identity of music students prompted them to suggest that teachers personally become engaged in the local communities, and Lind and McKoy (2016), in their examination of culturally responsive teaching, suggested community partnerships. Chong et al. (2013) offered examples within the US of partnerships between community music groups and university students, such as the mariachi group at the University of North Texas, but there is little evidence that such partnerships are widespread. Community partnerships at the high school level are even more scarce.

In addition to the above-mentioned disconnect between school music and local communities, technology now contributes to the potential alienation of school music from the worlds in which students exist. The ever-increasing impact of technology on student lives was pointed out early in the twenty-first century by Regelski (2006), who noted that school music had to compete with social media for musical relevance for the youth of that time. With advances in technology and increased use of cell phones, the prevalence of social media and student access to it have grown since Regelski’s article. Speaking with my own students reveals how they create playlists, add music to their personal “how-to” and “a day in the life” videos in an attempt to create the latest viral sensation, take part in dance and singing challenges via Tik Tok, and follow their favorite artists

online. They are no longer reliant on school to introduce them to various musics outside of their own cultures or communities because they have the ability to access millions of pieces of music from across the globe with a few simple searches on their phones. By comparison, school music can seem narrowly focused and restrictive.

Such restrictiveness can affect students' interactions with music. Bradley (2012) found that music education often fails to develop students' personal and unique individual relationships with music. The lack of these individual relationships could be due to the decision made by many US music educators to isolate music from its context and meaning, focusing so much on formal technique and performance product that little time is left for contextual study and reflection on musical meaning. Hess (2019b) discussed the importance of understanding place and experience as a part of music education, noting that music is a situated practice. Separating music from human experience is to deny music's natural connectivity to the very people who create and perform it, people who exist in a specific place and time and have specific lived experiences that impact their music-making. Hess (2019b) argued the importance of youth "understand(ing) music as a human practice rooted in lived experience, as well as assert(ing) their own unique contributions" (p. 38). Such an understanding can be difficult to obtain if school music remains isolated.

Failing to embrace music's potential connectiveness to students' lived experiences can also affect student identity. In his application of Barrett's (2011) work on cultural psychology, Smith (2019) discussed the interconnectedness of music, culture, identity, and experiences, noting that, "through the culture we create and curate in our

schools, classrooms and institutions, we can (and inevitably do) affect and effect the identity realization of students in our care” (p. 305). Smith (2019) further discussed the potential role of music learning and study in both identity and learning realizations, noting that, “music education directly and profoundly impacts identity realization and learning realization; a person’s sense of self, their future learning choices, and in turn the impact of these on identity are always at stake” (p. 307). Whether consciously or unconsciously, educators who continue to isolate school music from the outside world and ignore the potential to connect music to students’ lived experiences are potentially having an adverse effect on their students’ identities and sense of self.

Potential for School Choirs in the US to Evolve

School choir culture does not have to stay hegemonic. It does not need to remain isolated from the political and social worlds of the students who participate. It could evolve to teach both the old and the new, embracing some of the cherished repertoire and traditions of the past but also modernizing to connect to the lived experiences of today’s youth. Choir in US schools could embrace the new normal mentioned by de Quadros (2019), but to do so, the culture, defining practices, and measures of success surrounding educational choral groups must change. The purpose and measure of success of school choirs could be redefined within schools and districts, with less emphasis placed on competition standards and more emphasis placed on connection and musical meaning. This would allow the place and position of school choirs in the social world of the students to potentially expand. Rather than schools and directors measuring achievement by a contest rating or justifying existence through the number of sweepstakes trophies at

choir competitions, the success of school choral programs could be determined through the musical knowledge, student expression, and empowerment of its members. Instead of only embracing conformity to traditional Western standards in repertoire and choral sound, directors could lead their school choirs to also examine other musics, connecting to students' personal experiences with music and embracing the diversity existent in student voices (both externally through vocal styles and internally as part of student identity).

A school choral program's accomplishments could include fostering individual relationships with music, using music to develop identity, and empowering student voice. School choral directors could choose to work with social media and technology instead of fighting against it for relevance with their students. Rather than restricting school music to the concert halls, choral educators could find ways to expand the social connections and impact of school music to the world outside those isolated auditoriums. Such measures of success would embrace a variety of musics in a non-hierarchical manner and foster collaboration and communication across cultures, achieving many of the goals of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy in a student-centered manner. The empowerment and presence of student voice could lead to more critical pedagogy as well, helping students find freedom in music and embrace the potential of music to impact society.

Dialogic Practices as a Way Forward

For these types of changes to take place, traditional monologic choral classrooms have to be adjusted. One possibility is for choir directors to embrace a more dialogic

approach in choral teaching that would allow students to interact with the music and empower them to make choices regarding repertoire, interpretation, and meaning. Such dialogue would ideally be implemented as part of a broader view of music education that examined not just music but the world in which the students lived.

De Quadros (2019) and de Quadros and Amrein (2023) offered numerous examples of dialogic choral experiences in communities. These included songwriting by those incarcerated, songwriting and arranging by members of university chorus groups, collegiate glee clubs and choruses implementing outreach programs with local schools and children's groups, group singing in refugee shelters, diverse repertoire with a focus on both musical and textual meaning, singing that crosses political and social borders, and theater programs that become a form of storytelling for participants. These examples implemented dialogic practices that fulfilled aspects of CP, specifically a practice similar to border crossing (Giroux, 2005). Swanson and Cohen (2023) and Cohen and Duncan (2022) noted similar impactful border crossing experiences with community music groups, specifically working with the incarcerated population. The potential for social change, the crossing and intermingling of different groups, and the increase in awareness and understanding are just a few of the positive experiences linked to such prison and community choral groups (Cohen & Duncan, 2022).

The songwriting and music outreach among incarcerated individuals, as well as the border crossing singing and theater troupe, could be considered other forms of dialogue that resemble the CP advocated by Freire (1970). Sullivan et al. (2020) argued that such experiences that blended outside community members and incarcerated

individuals through music making created liminal spaces that were “neither outside nor inside” – spaces that included reflection, bravery, safety, and community different from what either group could experience within their usual surroundings and that embodied a different sort of freedom. Such dialogic use in education can be empowering, freeing, and perspective changing. Yet a different representation of dialogue and CP, the glee clubs aligned more with the CP tenets outlined by Abrahams (2005, 2017). Despite their varied presentations of CP, participants in these different cases all embraced ideas set forth by Giroux (2005) by using music-making to redefine or transform their identities within the existing power structures. However, despite the success of these examples, there has been little research into dialogic teaching with pre-collegiate students.

The few examples for pre-collegiate music education that I did find in my research presented more diverse definitions of dialogue and student empowerment, embracing Giroux’s (2005) idea of the classroom as an avenue for interrogating larger issues of the world beyond the classroom walls. Forms of composition and creation were embraced in dialogic fashion as a means of storytelling by some educators and researchers. Hess (2019a) suggested that certain types of music, such as hip hop, can be a form of counterstorytelling, especially when students are given the opportunity to write some of their own music or verses to express their reality and interaction with the world in which they live. Bylica’s (2020) soundscape composition projects for middle school students also illustrate musical storytelling, a form of dialogue in which the students use music to critically examine and define the world around them.

Other examples of dialogic teaching at the pre-collegiate level examined listening

and musical meaning. Lewis (2020) discussed the potential dialogic relationship between listener and music, offering a new dimension to typical listening exercises, and Spruce (2015) suggested the possibility of co-constructed musical meanings as part of a dialogic approach, allowing for exploration of how each individual interacts with the music and gives it meaning. Bylica's (2023) more complex exploration in this field examined dialogic listening as a care-filled activity, proposing music listening as a means of caring with each other and exploring varying ideas of creativity and purpose.

The above examples illustrate dialogic practices in a variety of music classrooms, many of them oriented more towards general music. When specifically exploring ensembles and the choral paradigm within US schools, the traditional nature of the programs involved makes dialogue more difficult. Exemplars of dialogic practices in such programs are even more limited, and they primarily focus on the interactions within and amongst the ensemble membership. However, even these more limited interactions expand the effects of music education beyond the walls of the classroom. Viewing the interactions and relationships amongst ensemble members as a microcosm of society, DeLorenzo et al. (2019) argued that ensembles could be viewed and taught as communities. Hess (2019b) also suggested that ensembles could be taught as a practice of community, elaborating that ensemble members could learn to value the contributions of others, assert their own voices when appropriate, and create a supportive and respectful environment.

Learning to be in dialogue with each other, respecting each other's cultures, and appreciating each other's contributions even if they are different, are all important aspects

of a successful equitable community. They also align with some crucial aspects of CRP and CSP: the importance of dialogue and understanding, the need for cultural competency, the desire to critique societal inequities, and the fostering of respect to enable members to sustain their individual strengths and beliefs (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris and Alim, 2014). These ideas, both those presented for choirs and those more aligned with general music, have potential for adaptation in US choral classrooms, bringing about more connections with lived experiences and providing students with an avenue through which they can potentially impact the world around them and express their own identities and perspectives.

Relational Practices: Safe Educators Implementing Care in the Classrooms

Cooper (2012) noted the importance of music classrooms functioning as safe and affirming spaces for students, especially minority youth. Hendricks et al. (2014) provided a more instructional and student-centered approach to making music classrooms safe spaces by focusing on teacher interaction rather than the space itself, emphasizing the importance of teachers relationally responding to students in a positive and meaningful way that celebrates creative risk-taking and nurtures learning. More recent research has challenged the terminology of safe spaces, making an appeal for more realistic and specific language that focuses even more on the humanness involved in feeling safe. Garrett and Palkki (2021) argued that “A safe space is not safe because someone says that it is. Safe spaces are created by safe *people*” (p. 78, emphasis in original). Tuinstra (2024) emphasized this idea as well, noting the importance of marginalized students having at least one safe person they can reach out to at their school, arguing that it is impossible to

guarantee a safe space, but a student can find safety through connection with an accepting and understanding teacher. Tuinstra (2024) argued that music educators should “first work to become safe people” (p. 34).

Implementing dialogic practices in the choral classroom would mean emphasizing such relational communication and trust to hopefully build that type of safety, focusing more on connecting than competing. To do this teachers and school leaders would need to examine priorities and be willing to potentially change some of the cherished traditions and practices so that focus could shift from product to process. When Lee (2023) took over her position, she noted that despite the numerous rewards and trophies displayed in the music room, she wanted to use a different approach with her students, noting, “My priority was providing students access to meaningful musical experiences, and competing for prestigious honors was not a way I believed that would be accomplished” (p. 143). For Lee, the focus was more on connectivity and care. Such concern for meaningfulness infers a desire to connect students with the music they perform, perhaps by either helping them engage critically with the material or connecting it in some way to their own cultures or lives. It also demonstrates a form of caring that is relational in nature, similar to the type of care encouraged by Hendricks (2021a, 2023, 2025), mentioned in chapter 1 and further discussed subsequently.

Distinctions in Care

Hendricks (2023) posited that the changing landscape within our classrooms makes compassionate care more important than ever, but the idea of care playing a consequential role in education has been growing for the last few decades. Regelski

(2012) argued that teaching was a helping profession, and as such, is bound by certain ethics, including the ethics of care. He noted that caring teachers do not try to dictate their students' needs, but instead determine the needs of their students, and then strive to meet those needs. More broadly, Noddings (2002) discussed care ethics and its role in a moral education, describing the ethics of care as the “ethics of duty and right – the ethic of care speaks of obligation” (p. 13). Music teachers, by engaging in a helping profession, also assume the duty of care in relation to their students. However, as I noted in chapter 1, care is about more than just duty.

I previously discussed the early research in care: the differentiation between I-It and I-Thou relationships (Buber, 1970, as cited in Hendricks, 2023), the critique of the male-centric view of care (Gilligan, 1982, as cited in Hendricks, 2023), and the feminist response to such criticism by Noddings (1992). These ideas regarding care were later further expanded, adding complexity and nuance. Noddings (2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017) differentiated between different types of care, something also done by Gay (2018) when discussing culturally responsive teaching. I discussed these forms of care in chapter 1 but will elaborate upon them further here. *Caring about* (Noddings, 2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017), similar to Gay's (2018) *aesthetic caring*, is not necessarily relational but still important. Comparable to Buber's description of I-It relationships, *caring about* is impersonal with little relational activity between the carer and the object of care. Teachers *care about* their subject; students *care about* receiving good grades or may have a general interest in a subject. It is *caring about* that often provides the initial impetus for involvement. On the other hand, *caring for* (Noddings, 2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017),

which is similar to Gay's (2018) *authentic* caring but without the special emphasis on culture, is very relational and personal. More in line with Buber's I-Thou relationship ideals, *caring for* someone implies awareness of another individual and concern or attention for that person's perspectives, needs, and desires. Lee (2023) noted students' yearning to connect with each other, a desire to *care for* others and be *cared for*. *Caring for* is reciprocal and relational.

I mentioned in chapter 1 that Hendricks (2021a, 2023, 2025) took the idea of care further in her exploration of its role in music education, adding an additional category of care, *caring with*. In her argument for compassionate music education, Hendricks (2018) discussed key components of compassionate education. While all of these components are important, two of them, trust and empathy, are particularly relevant to my discussion of *caring with* in this study.

When discussing trust, Hendricks (2018) differentiated between collective trust and relational trust. Groups with high collective trust are more likely to have positive expectations, be willing to experience vulnerability and risk, and foster interdependence and positivity within the group. The relational trust between individuals promotes many of those same experiences, but on an individual level. Hendricks (2018) identified seven facets of relational trust: vulnerability, confidence, benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness (pp. 36–45). Placing these facets in a typical ensemble classroom, one can see the opportunities: the vulnerability of students going on stage together or discussing deeper meanings of music, the confidence the teacher has in the students or that the students have in each other, the benevolence felt for and with the other members

of the group, the practice of being reliable through practicing and behavior, the work put forth to be competent, the honesty in critique, and the openness in exploring other musical styles or meanings are just a few of the myriad possibilities. When these aspects of trust are fostered in a classroom between teacher and students without manipulation or domination, *caring with* can emerge.

Empathy is similarly important in *caring with*. Hendricks (2018) outlined different types of empathy: cognitive, affective, and compassionate or motivational. Cognitive empathy is the “ability to consider in our minds what someone else might be experiencing (Hendricks, 2018, p. 56). Students respond with cognitive empathy when they perceive their teacher’s musical intentions through nonverbal cues, or when they notice by their teacher’s terse movements that things are tense. Alternatively, affective empathy occurs when a person involuntarily feels what another person is feeling (Hendricks, 2018). Compassionate or motivational empathy involves the understanding and feeling of the other two, but then adds an impetus to act (Hendricks, 2018). Cognitive and affective empathy are important, but compassionate empathy, promoting both understanding and feeling for and with others that then compels positive action, encourages more advanced notions of care.

Building upon these ideas and wishing to move away from dominant/inferior power dynamics, Hendricks (2021a) characterized *caring with* as a “spiritual communion rather than roles to be performed” (p. 246). Emphasizing the equality and genuineness of those involved, Hendricks (2021a, 2023) argued that *caring with* students in the classroom is a form of interaction that encourages authenticity and vulnerability. These

meaningful interactions are fluid and equitable, with both parties journeying together and learning together.

Discussing the implementation of such care in the classroom, Hendricks (2025) promoted the use of identity-responsive pedagogy, which emphasized caring for and an awareness of intersectional identities, and identity-affirming pedagogy, which encouraged identity transformation through *caring with*. For Hendricks (2025), care in the classroom should center more on the strengths and values of students than their deficits. Rather than dictating their goals and needs to them Hendricks (2025) proposed accompanying students, unconditionally loving them and encouraging them on their journey towards becoming the people they want to be. More than the other forms of care, *caring with* requires a sharing of power and a relinquishing of the need for domination and control.

Valuing Everyone's Stories

Sometimes caring dialogue can result in storytelling and counterstorytelling. Examples of this can be found in Bylica's (2020) research into border crossing through soundscapes, as middle school students created and then critically discussed musical compositions describing how they heard and perceived their worlds. The "empowering song" approach described by de Quadros and Amrein (2023, p. 5) is a communal form of musicking that tells the stories of those involved and also creates a new story of shared experience and dialogue. Gay (2018) argued that stories can "entertain, educate, inform, evoke memories, showcase ethnic and cultural characteristics, and illuminate abstractions" (p. 3). They can also help individuals gain empathy, shifting their perspective so they see through another's eyes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Counterstories, or non-majoritarian narratives, specifically validate the experiences and knowledge of minorities (Bernal, 2002, Hendricks, 2021b).

Critical race theory encourages storytelling and counterstorytelling as a primary means of hearing and valuing minority voices (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Although originally applied to the study of law, critical race theory has applicability in education as well, mainly centered around equity, access, policies, and teacher practices (Chapman, 2010). However, I argue that in education, the respecting and valuing of other's stories can also demonstrate Care. Noddings (2002) noted that *caring about* was “instrumental in establishing the conditions under which ‘caring for’ can flourish” (p. 86), so *caring about* lived experiences, cultures, and personal histories revealed through storytelling lays the foundation for *caring for*. It is through the receipt, acknowledgement, and response to those stories that a *caring for* relationship can be established, embodying a form of that reciprocal care described by Noddings (2002). Once sharing has begun, open dialogue and mutual respect can be fostered, encouraging the type of genuine accompaniment and *caring with* discussed by Hendricks (2021a, 2023, 2025).

Evidence of such Caring power in storytelling can be found through the efforts of some music educators and researchers who, in their attempt to demonstrate care and value for their marginalized students, have begun to not only incorporate diverse repertoire and styles, but to also take the time to listen to what marginalized students have to say. Through such open listening and acknowledgement of stories, teachers and researchers have been able to explore the relationship between an individual's life, culture, and music on a much more profound and deep level, before then turning a critical

eye to themselves or the currently established music traditions. Lechuga et al. (2018) illustrated this when discussing Carlos' story of "cultural straddling" (p. 90). As a music education major heavily invested in teaching mariachi in the future, Carlos led a sort of double existence as he worked through traditional music education courses while also functioning as a key member of a mariachi ensemble. In their research, Lechuga et al. (2018) explored the many ways that Carlos functioned in both the traditional formal music education realm and the mariachi realm, before then turning a critical eye inward to examine the ways in which they had both supported Carlos and hindered his progress.

Others have compared and contrasted counterstories of successful marginalized music educators through other theoretical lenses to more fully illuminate the ability to overcome oppression. Williams (2021) chose this approach with her dissertation, using Black feminist thought to explore the counterspaces created by various African American female band directors. Research involving stories, counterstories, and counterspaces in music education continues to grow. In a recent publication, Cayari et al. (2025) offer researchers a closer look into some of the unheard narratives surrounding racial identity in the music education, relayed by teachers and students within the field. For this research, I focus on the students' stories, stories I can only hear if I *care for* and *with* my students: stories about hidden injustices, the pressures of being a high achieving teenager, the brave faces that hide inner hurt, and the strength of coming together — stories that they can use music to tell.

The Power of Musical Stories: Moving Towards Social Justice

Attempts to create caring and dialogic choral classrooms, if successful, would ideally provide choral students with opportunities to tell their own stories and connect music with the world around them. Students could tell stories to be heard, to encourage understanding, and to promote change. By *caring with* her students, a teacher could encourage critical examination of those stories, supporting students in their exploration of a social topic both inwardly through personal critical reflection and outwardly as a concerned and critical citizen of the community. Such critical examination could then become an extension of care as the students explored ways they *cared about* the world around them and *cared for* others in their communities. Such an outcome could be a sensitive approach to social justice.

When I first read Donaldson's (2020) dissertation describing a social justice-themed concert he produced with a collegiate choir, I was inspired to learn more and maybe try my own adaptation of such an endeavor. Donaldson's (2020) concert was centered around the theme of race, which he felt was relevant to the community in which he taught. He chose both music and poems to create an entire concert that dove deeply into the presence and effects of racism. Donaldson (2020) discussed the importance of providing depth and reflection for the students throughout the process, providing both in-depth music analysis and critical text analysis. The addition of poetry throughout the concert served to tie the various musical works together and provide both audience members and performers with an additional perspective on the racism issues being addressed. Based off of its description and the reflection offered by Donaldson (2020),

the concert seemed impactful. However, the process also raised some questions.

Lewis (2020) argued that when teaching social justice, it was important as a teacher to promote a social justice that was relevant to the students. Donaldson (2020) felt that the topic he chose was relevant to the community, but that relevancy was determined and further endorsed in a top-down manner. Donaldson (2020) chose the topic, conducted research to find appropriate and relevant music, then promoted that relevancy through in-depth discussions and analysis during rehearsals. Such an approach seems to potentially objectify and use minority stories without any real input from minority individuals. In her discussion on Buber's writings regarding I-Thou and I-It relationships, Hess (2021) argued that minority storytelling could turn into an I-It scenario if minority stories were used and treated as knowable objects. Donaldson (2020) had seemingly not taken the nuanced aspects of Care into consideration when creating his concert. There was a strong *caring about* aspect, but evidence of *caring for* and *caring with* were less prominent. With a top-down approach, Donaldson's (2020) concert could be perceived as advancing a more I-It association rather than the more fluid I-Thou relationship, promoting more of a rescue scenario than a gesture of accompaniment. The music was also still primarily classical in nature, so even though the topic was presented partially as a means of encouraging dialogue within the community, the music used to encourage that dialogue was mainly monocultural.

When discussing social justice in music classrooms, Lewis (2020) advocated student-chosen music, an idea that also aligns with one of the tenets of CRP and CSP. Maybe allowing some of the music within Donaldson's concert to be student-chosen

would have made it less monocultural. However, the end result would still be a concert with a theme of social justice that was chosen using a top-down approach. It would not embrace the *caring-with* ideals I hoped to model and promote in my classroom. I needed to examine the various meanings social justice could encompass to better understand what social justice in a choral classroom could look like.

DeLorenzo et al. (2019) wrote that social justice “has its roots in valuing humanity and human life” (p. 152). That value placed on human life would include a person’s story, perspective, or view. Connecting that valuing to Fraser’s (2009) idea of participatory parity that I discussed in Chapter 1, an individual’s lack of opportunity to fully interact in society and be heard would be unjust. These ideas regarding lack of opportunity and valuing can be used to build a foundation upon which social justice topics can be evaluated and chosen. They also provide a way of defending and promoting social justice in a classroom setting. Students could have opportunities to develop trust and empathy with one another and with those outside the school surrounding a topic meaningful to them. With the meaning of social justice more clearly established, I now needed to differentiate between social justice themes in my classroom and actual social justice implementation.

When discussing potential connections between social justice and choirs, de Quadros (2019) identified “five principal frames of activity” (p. 35), comprised of inclusionary choir demographics, programming that was activist oriented, community engagement activities with marginalized populations, singing at gatherings that involved the community or marginalized populations, and working collaboratively with non-

government organizations that are justice or equity oriented. For all of these elements to be present, several ideas need to be combined and expanded. Donaldson's (2020) idea of a themed concert surrounding a social justice topic provides a starting point, but to be dialogic and better fulfill the ideal of CP encouraged by Abrahams (2005, 2017) the power dynamics would need to shift, placing more value on student voice. Similar to the various community music examples, the social justice topic and resulting concert could be approached from a bottom-up approach, not top-down. The students should pick the topic, not the director. With some assistance, students could also choose the music, examining the cultural and social perspectives of the pieces as encouraged by Kelly-McHale (2016). If open and honest dialogue were established in a caring classroom, students would be more likely to choose music that was relevant and meaningful to them, thereby increasing connectivity as advocated by Lewis (2020), CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and CSP (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014). Such student-chosen music could also serve as a form of storytelling.

By applying Spruce's (2015) dialogic idea of co-construction of musical meaning, teachers could encourage students to find new meanings and purposes in existing pieces of music and design a concert event that functions as a social justice activity. Students could work collaboratively on the repertoire, using existing songs to tell a narrative and promote an ideal, reimagining and repurposing music into something bold and purposeful, a different form of developing the authorial agency encouraged by Bylica (2023). They would need to conduct their own research and receive some practical guidance from the director, but the students could use the music they selected, along with

their own written reflections and narratives, to make a statement about a social issue and encourage change. To make it a social justice activity, not just a themed concert, outreach and activism would need to occur. Students could choose a relevant community partner to work with, coordinating efforts to physically work with the people involved, but also making the concert itself a benefit concert event. It would have to be done sensitively and safely, in a relational manner, applying Care (in all its forms) to all aspects of the concert and educational processes. If successful, the resulting concert event and educational experience could have a very deep and personal meaningfulness and relevance to those involved, empowering the students and emboldening them to perceive both music and the world around them a little differently.

After her choir's successful performance as the featured group at a convention, Lee (2023) noted that her preparation with the group, which included a heavy emphasis on meaning and contextuality, had a profound effect on the outcome of their performance, "rather than feeling that their performance was scrutinized, my students felt understood, seen, and appreciated" (p. 145). If successful, this social justice concert event would hopefully achieve something similar in the realm of social justice and choral education. Maybe it could be an example of a "new normal" for educational choral programs.

From Elitist Hegemony to Caring and Socially Minded Dialogue

I began this literature review by noting the incongruence between the diverse student population in US schools and the narrow and monologic music teaching commonly found in US music classrooms. The prevalence of the elitist choir, band, orchestra paradigm (Mantie & Tucker, 2012), and the extreme competitiveness of many

US music programs (Abramo, 2017; Allsup, 2010; Hess, 2025; Mantie, 2024; Powell, 2023), reinforce Regelski's (2012) concerns regarding music education, which included musicianism, hegemony, and self-serving teaching practices. The prevalence and power of policy to dismiss popular music (Smith et al., 2022) and the overwhelming canonicity prevalent in music education (wamwa Mwanga, 2025), perpetuates the problematic marginalization or othering of non-Eurocentric classical music noted by De Lorenzo et al. (2019).

Numerous researchers have noted the exclusionary and elitist nature of choir in the US, with its Western European repertoire (Hess, 2018a, de Quadros, 2019), overreliance on WSMN (Kivijärvi & Väkevä, 2020), and limited aurality (Hess, 2018a). Such practices have resulted in musical knowledge being narrowly defined (Benedict et al., 2015), and music educators often hold the power of controlling who does and does not gain access (Hendricks, 2021b). There have been varied attempts to shift such hegemonic and authoritarian practices, such as CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995), CSP (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014), and CP (Abrahams, 2005, 2017; Freire, 1970), but none of these attempts have resulted in widespread success.

An examination of community music reveals a strong difference in music culture and inclusivity, with an approach that is less director-driven and more focused on member input and critical social engagement (Bartleet & Higgins, 2018). Such an approach and focus contrasts drastically with the isolation of school music (Kelly-McHale, 2013; Regelski, 2012). Identity and purpose are also strong components in most community music groups (Avery et al., 2013). If we, as music educators, are always

impacting our students' identities (Smith, 2019), then school music educators need to recognize the potential negative impact they could have on their students through continued hegemonic and elitist practices. As teachers, the choices we make have an effect on our students, both positive and negative, some intended, some unintended.

There is potential for school choir programs to transform by embracing dialogic practices. De Quadros (2019) and de Quadros and Amrein (2023) offered numerous examples of dialogic choral practices in communities but there are fewer examples in the field of education. However, adapting the community music examples and combining them with educator examples such as co-construction of musical meaning (Spruce, 2015), dialogic listening (Lewis, 2020), and critical listening (Bylica, 2023) presents a possible way forward.

A key component in dialogue is safety; participants need to be able to trust each other, embrace vulnerability, and be willing to take risks. Implementing Care in the classroom is crucial to establish such relational trust. Care ethics also dictate that, as educators, it is our duty to care for our students. However, Care is about more than fulfilling a duty, it is about fostering a relationship and choosing to respond to another's needs or walk with another person on a journey together. There are numerous forms of Care, and the nuances and differences between those forms of Care matter in education. Teachers who forget the importance of differentiating between It-It and I-Thou relationships risk objectifying their students (Buber, 1970 as cited in Hendricks 2023; Hess, 2021). Teachers unaware of Nodding's (1984, 2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017) feminist perspective on care and her differentiation between caring about and caring for

risk placing the product of a perfect performance above the learning process and growth important to the students they are teaching. Teachers who are not willing to shift the power dynamics and care with their students (Hendricks, 2021a, 2023, 2025), risk silencing their students' voices rather than promoting empowerment.

The application of Care can help encourage dialogue and empower people to tell their stories. Stories and counterstories have value (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) but they are only beginning to be explored in music education. However, it is through stories that we can potentially move towards more inclusiveness, cultural acceptance, and critical mindedness. By increasing dialogue and encouraging student storytelling, music educators could potentially work with the social activism, purpose, and identity aspects of community music within the confines of US music education, transforming US choirs. US choral students could shift from viewing music as a school activity in which they perform, to seeing music as something empowering and transformative, realizing that they have the power to change the world around them.

Chapter Three: Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore audience members' and student participants' perceptions of a dialogue-based choral curriculum and caring teaching approach focused on student empowerment and social activism in music, and the resulting student-planned social justice benefit concert. My research was initially guided by one main research question:

- How do students and audience members experience meaningfulness and relevance of a student-led social justice concert that was the product of a dialogic choral project?

As my research continued, I realized that while the main research question was sufficient for analyzing the experiences and perceptions of meaningfulness and relevance of the concert overall, two additional secondary research questions were needed to help direct the dialogic and student voice elements of my research. The secondary questions explored aspects of dialogic teaching between myself and the students and their resulting planning processes, specifically examining power dynamics and student goals.

- In what ways, if any, did students feel that the dialogic power dynamics between teacher and students affected the classroom and learning?
- In what ways, if any, did students feel that their goals for the project promoted student voice and empowerment through storytelling?

In this chapter I explore the methodology of my qualitative instrumental case study by first defining the qualitative nature of the research, then providing an in-depth description of the setting and context of the study. I next provide a description of the

research participants, including the selection strategies used, the demographics of the participants, and a brief description of the information needed for the research. Next, I discuss the methodology and design of the study, including descriptions of the problem feasibility and ethics of the research. I then present the data collection section, in which I provide a description of the methods of data collection used for each data type: field notes, observation notes, interviews, and artifacts. I then describe the deductive and inductive analysis techniques used in the research, followed by a discussion on trustworthiness, including considerations of the credibility, confirmability, and dependability of the research. I focus the final sections of the chapter on the ethical considerations of the research and my researcher positionality, then finish with a chapter summary.

Type of Study

This was a qualitative, instrumental case study, designed to provide music educators with in-depth insight into student and audience perceptions of a caring, dialogic choral teaching unit in a choral ensemble class that was focused on student empowerment and social activism, and the resulting student-planned social justice concert. The research shares many traits with critical action research (Bloomberg, 2023), including the social and political nature of the research, the intent to transform or create change in an educational system, and the close relationship between researcher and participants. However, the research does not follow Bloomberg's (2023) methodological description of action research, depicted as an "ongoing cycle of plan-act-reflect" (p.104). The research better aligns with Creswell and Poth's (2018) definition of a case study by

providing in-depth description and analysis of a real-life issue over time, within a bounded system.

The contemporary issue at stake in this study was the use of a caring dialogic teaching approach in a choral classroom to teach relevant social justice issues and encourage student empowerment and outreach, instead of the more traditional monologic and monocultural choral teaching approach found in many classrooms in the United States that often serves the needs of the program or music director as much or more than then needs of the individual students or communities in which those students reside. The bounded system for this case was a small group of select choral students at a private school in the Midwestern United States and the audience members who attended the social justice concert. As suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), the research was conducted “over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (p. 96). The research took place over an eight-month period. I collected data both during the teaching and student planning processes and during the month following the concert event through interviews. The multiple sources of data collection included field notes from my own teaching, observation notes from leadership meetings, interviews of both students and audience members, and artifacts related to the concert.

Stake (1995) wrote, “we are interested in them [case studies] for both their uniqueness and their commonality” (p. 1). This case study is unique in its context, but common in the issues it addresses. The in-depth information gained from the research could potentially provide insight and understanding of how students in a particular school

choral group responded to caring dialogic teaching, especially as it pertained to social justice and student empowerment, and how audience members within that school community reacted to such presentations of student voice and social activism. Emphasizing the particular context, teaching, approach, and participants of this case study, the research strives not to provide overarching educational generalizations, but rather penetrating and potential complex perceptions and realizations.

The study can also be evaluated according to Stake's (1995) recommendations for high quality case studies: it was clearly defined, there were sufficient data resources that could potentially be triangulated, and measures were taken to protect all those involved, including both confidentiality and sensitivity (p. 54). The student leaders chose a topic that could potentially put individuals in a vulnerable position, so sensitivity regarding participant feelings and project content were a high priority, especially in regard to power dynamics.

Setting and Context

Stake (1995) noted the importance of context and setting in case studies, arguing that in case studies, researchers seek to "appreciate the uniqueness and complexity of [the case] (and) its embeddedness and interaction with its contexts" (p. 16). To best understand this case, a detailed description of the research site is needed. Through a rich description of the site, readers can better situate and understand the research.

Saint School: The Picture of High Achievement and Success

The site of my research, Saint School⁵ is a private Augustinian Catholic school

⁵ Pseudonyms used throughout to protect confidentiality.

located in the midwestern United States. Serving grades 6–12, the school is relatively small, with a total enrollment of only 544 students during the 2023–2024 school year. An elite college preparatory school, Saint School boasts a 100% college matriculation rate, with many students accepted at both private and public universities, often with academic scholarships (part of the graduation speech each year includes the amount, in dollars, of scholarship money awarded to the graduating class). Students must pass an entrance exam to be admitted to the school, and some years the school has a waiting list of students seeking admission. The school's tuition is quite high compared to the cost of living in the area, and most of the other private schools nearby cost several thousand dollars less to attend. The school is accredited both through the local state accreditation and the rigorous Cognia⁶ accreditation, which evaluates schools in the US and various other countries, receiving the Cognia recognition of a school of distinction in 2022.

The school campus is quite picturesque. The main section of the school, with its turrets and brick facade, was constructed in the 1920s, and when additions were later built to accommodate the growing school, architects kept the same style and brick, connecting the different sections of the school seamlessly. A school chapel in similar style and boasting beautiful stained-glass windows and large wooden doors, sits near the circle drive on the front portion of the school property, near the monastery where a few priests reside. In back, a football field, tennis courts, baseball diamond, and wrestling building are nestled between the student parking lots and the back entrance to the school. The

⁶ The Cognia accreditation program can be examined in more detail at <https://www.cognia.org/accreditation/>

performing arts center also lies near the back school entrance. Although attached to the main school building, it contains its own more modern glass entryway for those attending a school performance. The school is well-landscaped, with flowers, shrubs, mowed grass, and even a small statue of St Augustine. Names of prominent donors can be seen on various walls and plaques around the school, along with paintings of past headmasters, various crosses, trophies, and school spirit paraphernalia – all the finery and fixtures that spell success.

Student Demographics Within Saint School

Student economic and social diversity within the school has increased over the last decade, and there has been a slight increase in ethnic diversity as well, but overall the student population is still primarily white. The middle school (grades 6–8) is smaller than the upper school and less diverse, with a white population over 78% at the beginning of the 2023–2024 school year. By contrast, the upper school (grades 9–12) during the same time frame was 66.5% white, with the remaining student population consisting of 10.3% Hispanic, 9.2% American Indian, 7.3% Asian, and 6.7% Black (school registrar). The economic range amongst students is quite drastic, with some students inhabiting some of the largest houses in the city (some of which boast bowling alleys, private theaters, and multiple guest rooms with balconies and private pools), while others receive free lunch from the school and work jobs to help with the family bills. The school has worked to increase the amount of financial assistance they provide to students, and during the 2023–2024 school year, 116 families received need-based financial aid (school registrar). No merit-based financial awards are given by the institution. Although the school is Catholic,

only 50% of the student body is Catholic. Most of the student body is heterosexual, but there are openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual students within the student body. I am not aware of any transgender students within the student body.

Saint School's Academics

Saint School's environment is one of community, service, and achievement. The school strives to offer a holistic liberal arts education that educates the whole child, so students are strongly encouraged to participate in multiple activities and extracurriculars. Most students choose to participate in one or more of the numerous athletics offered by the school along with other activities or clubs. The clubs and activities offered by the school appeal to a wide array of interests and include chess, academic bowl, key club, national honor society, science research, robotics, student council, world language clubs, mass leadership, mentoring, theater, and sports medicine, just to name a few. Along with the extracurriculars, students are expected to take a rigorous academic schedule that includes seven courses, all of which meet every day of the school week. AP courses, sponsored by the College Board and taught at a collegiate pace with a culminating test that can potentially grant high school students college credit, are strongly encouraged, with many students taking multiple AP classes throughout their high school career (449 AP exams were taken by students at the school in May 2024). Anyone taking an AP course is required to take the AP exam, and the school boasts a high pass rate (over 85% during the 2023–2024 school year).

All students also must fulfill a service component during each year of their high school, with students completing service hours both at their school and in the surrounding

community. During their junior and senior years, students are encouraged to do a larger service intensive project of their own choosing that demonstrates prolonged commitment, leadership, and connection with a specific community partner or group in need. Students often work together during their community service commitments, in clubs or athletics, or as part of various study groups. In addition, class retreats are held each year to foster a sense of community and belonging. By the time the students graduate, they have become a close-knit family; they take prom pictures that include the entire senior class, and graduation speeches often dwell on the times they spent together and the things they will miss about the school. Graduates frequently stay in touch with both their classmates and some of the teachers and administrators at the school.

The Saint School Faculty

The school's faculty comprises accredited teachers, most of whom are deemed highly qualified by school and state standards. Approximately 60% of the faculty hold master's or doctoral degrees, one is nationally certified, and many pursue outside professional development opportunities. Although the pay received by faculty is comparable to that of the public schools in the area (which is drastically below national average), the school's teacher retention rate is high, with most teachers staying until they either move out of town or are ready to retire. Unlike most of the public schools in the area, there are adequate budgets for teachers to buy textbooks (which they choose collectively as a department) and other educationally necessary supplies for their classrooms and students.

Within each department, faculty are given the autonomy to create their own lesson

plans, student assessments, and general curriculum as long as students are able to meet high standards (usually national and AP standards) and are properly prepared for the next level of study in each subject area. On a broader scale, the faculty and administration work together frequently, with the administration boasting an open-door policy for the teachers. The administrators, while few in number, are heavily involved in the school, frequently visiting classrooms, attending school events, and visiting with both students and teachers during lunch. The department heads of the school meet each month to make curricular recommendations to the administration, and the administration relies heavily on teacher-led committees for other school decisions such as scheduling changes, school goals and mission statements, and professional development sessions (some of which are led internally by teachers who specialize in a particular field).

Fine and Performing Arts at Saint School

The fine and performing arts hold a subordinate yet valued place in the school hierarchy. Most of the school's graduates pursue non-arts degrees in college, then find their place in the adult workforce as business leaders, doctors, lawyers, teachers, scientists, engineers, and other high-profile jobs. However, there are graduates every few years who pursue arts degrees and careers, especially in music, with great success. To accommodate such a variety of students, arts instruction is heavily individualized and personalized. The fine arts department as a unit focuses not just on high standards within their specific disciplines, but also on relevance and self-expression for all students. This encourages the arts teachers to be more flexible with their curriculum, often incorporating a mixture of traditional and non-traditional approaches in their particular field to offer

students the best possible learning experiences.

Although small in number, the arts faculty bring varied expertise to their students as demonstrated by the two music teachers at the school who, combined, bring experience in piano, voice, guitar, and low brass performance, along with both music arranging and composition. The visual arts teachers are equally diverse in their areas of expertise, with abilities in drawing, painting, large and small sculpture, scratch art, ceramics, and photography. Students respond favorably to the expertise offered by these teachers, often taking far more than the two semesters of fine arts credit required for graduation. Many students average approximately six semesters each of fine arts courses during their eight-semester high school career and boast the completion of a wide variety of artistic endeavors.

The fine arts faculty members work together to present multiple opportunities to display student talents, opportunities that are acknowledged and appreciated by the administration. A typical school year includes two visual art shows for the general public, rotating displays of student artwork and photography within the school for students and faculty to view, seven different music concerts, two musicals, a play, and a speech and vocal showcase. All performances are well attended by parents and promoted to some degree on the school's social media. In addition, individual students participate in various music, art, speech, debate, and mock trial competitions at the local, state, regional, and national levels.

The music department at the school consists of only two teachers. One teaches all middle school music courses (grades 6–8), and upper school guitar courses (grades 9–12).

I am the other music teacher. I serve as the fine arts department chair and upper school choral director. I also occasionally teach a Music Theory course (dependent upon enrollment). The middle school music classes are primarily focused on general music and serve to introduce students to foundational music concepts through singing, guitar, rhythm instruments, focused listening, and Orff instruments. The upper school guitar courses include multiple levels and instruct students in a variety of guitar playing techniques using varying genres and musical styles. The music theory class, when available, teaches AP college board music theory content along with an introduction to other composition and choral arranging. All of the remaining music courses are choral-centric.

The Choral Curriculum at Saint School

My choral classes consist of several general chorus classes open to anyone, regardless of singing experience, and a small select audition-only ensemble group. The general chorus classes contain 25–35 students each. All four of the general chorus classes learn the same music so they can sing together at our concerts. The select vocal Ensemble consists of sixteen members who learn choral music that is more performative in nature and more advanced than much of the general chorus music, with a cappella works, featured soloists, difficult harmonies, and multiple voicings.

The school does not participate in group choral competitions, but individual students may choose to participate in solo competitions. I work with interested students before and after school, giving them private voice lessons at no additional cost to prepare them for competitions and college auditions. A few individual students have participated

in local competitions, but I mainly focus on larger solo competitions that not only provide the students with high quality feedback but also offer networking opportunities (these have included NATS, Schmidt, CS Music, the Grady Rayam Spiritual Competition, and the Carnegie Hall Honors Chorus). Such competitions better align with the school's high college preparatory standards and elite status.

The choirs I direct typically give four concerts a year (two each semester), each between 60 and 90 minutes long. Building upon the tradition of my predecessor, each concert features a wide variety of music. My curriculum map for the choirs features a two-year rotation that includes major classical choral works, smaller classical sacred works (including works in Latin), traditional Spanish works (suggested by my Hispanic students), works from the African continent, American popular music from multiple decades, American country music, folk music, jazz music (with a few students learning the basics of scat singing or jazz improvisation), gospels and spirituals, musical theater works (classic and modern era), movie and gaming music, rap, and the occasional Italian or German work. These are presented as non-hierarchically as possible, and the more advanced students are expected to appropriately adapt their singing techniques and vocal styles to the demands of each specific genre. Students typically follow music in class, but aural skills are emphasized. I have an extensive music library of choral works in my classroom and office that I reuse and add to each year, but I also arrange many of the works myself, adapting them to be as stylistically authentic as possible while also fitting the specific vocal needs of my choirs.

The Select Vocal Ensemble at Saint School

The group responsible for planning the March concert at the heart of this study is the select Ensemble group. Ensemble auditions are held each spring for the following school year and are open to any student entering grades 9–12. In an attempt to promote equity in the audition process, I do not have students come to auditions with a prepared solo. Instead, I teach small excerpts of music (with harmony) to all interested students, then have them come back on another day and sing those excerpts multiple times in various groups. Students are accepted into the group based on their auditions, with particular emphasis on blend, sound quality, ability to hold a harmony part, ability to work together as a team during the audition process, ability to learn music quickly, and ability to respond to feedback.

The Ensemble class meets every day of the week during school and consists of sixteen members (four for each voice part in SATB). They perform at the four school concerts each year but also give other smaller community service performances around the city, and several individuals within the group choose to study with me individually before or after school to prepare for solo performances at competitions or other events. To establish a more supportive atmosphere, I never have students audition for solo opportunities once they are in the group. I assign solos for concerts based on each student's educational needs and musical abilities, and I guarantee every student at least one solo opportunity at a concert during the school year. In addition, all senior Ensemble members choose a senior song for the final concert in May that will feature them as soloists.

The music reading abilities of the members vary, and the more knowledgeable and experienced members often assist those newer to the group. Ensemble leaders naturally emerge on their own, sometimes during their first year with the group but usually later as returning members. Leadership responsibilities fluctuate based on each leader's abilities, but they generally encompass organizational duties (collecting and handing out music), communication needs (reminders), morale (encouraging positivity, supporting members who may be struggling), and musical leadership (confidence on their vocal part, use of appropriate vocal technique, demonstration of specific vocal styles, assistance in reading and following music, assistance in creating harmonies, responding in improvisation exercises). The Ensemble leaders do not, however, rule with an iron fist. The group dynamic is more collaborative in nature, with leaders providing help and offering suggestions rather than dictating down specific commands.

To help establish their own identity and sense of community, the group picks its performance clothing each year. In addition, numerous Ensemble traditions are passed down each year, functioning almost as ritualistic activities of the Ensemble family: the students all have dinner together in the choir room before each concert, there are a few songs that are sung each year that returning members help teach the new members, senior Ensemble members get to lead the school alma mater at graduation, all Ensemble members perform together at baccalaureate mass, and before each concert the Ensemble students have a pre-performance circle gathering where they offer encouragement and support to each other before going on stage. During class, the students typically rehearse in a circle around the piano, with me as the director in the center. This allows them to not

only hear each other better, but it gives them the freedom to move around, and it promotes the idea that they are all equal.

The General Demographics of the Select Vocal Ensemble

The particular Ensemble group used for this research was made up of eleven seniors, two juniors, and three sophomores. Considering the demographics of the school, the group was fairly diverse in all areas. Regarding race and ethnicity, there were 12 white students, 1 African American student, 1 student of Native American/White mixed descent, 1 student of Latino/Jewish mixed descent whose parents immigrated to the US, and 1 student of Mexican descent, also a daughter of immigrants. The religious views of the students included practicing Catholics, Protestants, non-practicing individuals with Christian beliefs, and one atheist. The economic range of the students was wide: one student's family was quite wealthy, some students were middle class and living in three-bedroom homes, a few students received financial assistance from the school and lived in either smaller homes or two-bedroom apartments, and one student had to work to help her mother pay the bills for their small apartment where she had to sleep on the couch. Family dynamics consisted primarily of two-parent households, but with varied relationships within those households. One had an alcoholic father, and another lived with a parent and stepparent while the other parent lived in another state. There were also two students living with single moms. Thirteen members identified as heterosexual, one male was openly gay, and two females were openly bisexual.

The group was high-achieving and heavily involved in school activities. Ensemble members were affiliated with four different sports at the school: football,

baseball, golf, and track. In addition to athletics, individual Ensemble members were part of theater, club evolve (a diversity-focused club), sports medicine, science research, mass choir, mass leadership, private vocal study, and world language clubs. The students were advanced academically as well, with many of them enrolled in multiple AP courses. A total of twenty-eight AP exams were taken by that Ensemble group in May 2024, including exams in physics, language arts, literature, economics, biology, chemistry, psychology, trigonometry, and calculus. Many of the members also participated in activities outside of school. Six of them held part-time jobs, one student was working to get his pilot's license, and two were involved in community theater.

My Place Within Saint School

As a faculty member at Saint School for numerous years, I am firmly established within the school community and well supported by the administration. Although the academic focus of the school is tailored more to the high-profile professional jobs and college degrees that most of the alumni pursue, the arts are still respected, and I maintain a strong influence over much of the inner workings within the school. I, like the other faculty, have the freedom to create my own curriculum as long as it meets state or, preferably, national educational standards and adheres to the core values of the school. I use this freedom to individualize lessons so I can adequately meet the needs of all my students, whether they are just learning music for fun or planning to pursue it as a career. This curricular freedom also lowered the obstacles I had to overcome in order to conduct this research.

I was inspired to conduct this research by my students. Knowing the high-profile

positions many of my students would hold as adults, I wanted to show them the power of music and help them find their voice, hopefully inspiring them to change the world around them and find a place for music in their lives as they became adults. For those interested in pursuing music, I wanted to remind them that music was bigger than just notes on a page or the perfect vocal sound. The school environment in which I taught and the high achieving students I saw everyday seemed an ideal environment in which to try to make my research vision a reality. Their positions as potential leaders of the future could also provide very specific information regarding the potential future impact of the project.

Research Participants

My decision to conduct the research in my own classroom was not necessarily traditional — much of the research I had studied involved researchers going to other teacher’s classrooms — but it was ideal for this study. Bloomberg (2023) noted the importance of making “conscious choices” in research design rather than what was “convenient” (p. 261); my choices were definitely purposeful. Both the site and the participants fulfilled the necessary conditions for this study.

The site provided the much-needed curricular freedom and supportive administrators required to implement the curriculum and teaching methodology I was proposing. Any type of social justice content in a school setting can be problematic. I hoped that having students choose the topic would alleviate some of those concerns, but administrative support was still necessary for such an endeavor. Likewise, having curricular freedom, especially concerning concert programming, was essential. Free from

the constraints of group competitions or pre-established programming demands, I would be able to adapt music choices to provide the space for student chosen programming without sacrificing the broader music education goals for the class.

It was also important that I be the one teaching so I could develop the dialogic approach organically and respond to the students as needed. For the dialogic teaching to be effective, empowering, and genuine, there needed to be a strong and stabilized relational connection between students and teacher. I had already worked to establish myself with my students as a safe person who fostered a welcoming and inclusive classroom, the perfect foundation for this research. This was a new approach to teaching that I was constructing as the research unfolded, and I could not fully anticipate how the students would react. As their teacher it would be my job to use my research and knowledge to best respond to their choices and interactions while continuing to maintain that caring environment.

Most of the students in my classes pushed themselves (or were pushed by their parents) to maintain high grade point averages and rigorous academic and extracurricular schedules. This type of environment increased the chances of success for this project, since there was a likelihood of having student leaders who were intelligent, driven, focused, and motivated. It also meant that many of these students were aware of the forces of power that shape the world and already had visions of their potential roles within those forces in the future. Many of them had a thirst to make their mark and be heard. Balancing out those more individualistic aspirations, the school's strong holistic educational focus included a strong sense of community and service, which also made it

more likely that the students would be engaged with a social justice topic relevant to those around them.

Creswell and Poth (2018) outlined the potential outcomes of different participant selection strategies, noting the importance of choosing participants wisely and applying numerous criteria. Applying their criteria for my own participant selection, I purposely chose students in my small select Ensemble and audience members who attended the concert. My select Ensemble members were part of a homogeneous, intense, and criteria-based group. The homogenous nature of the select Ensemble group helped focus the data, providing a foundation of common experiences, while the intensity of the group provided rich and detailed information. These Ensemble students were dedicated students and close-knit. I had taught many of them for multiple years, so I had already established a high level of trust with most of the class. For many of these students, I aimed to be or already functioned as what Garrett and Palkki (2021) would label as a safe person, an important element in a caring and dialogic classroom that I discussed in chapter 2. As the research progressed, my students and I noted how that emphasis on safety extended into the interactions amongst the students, who showed a high level of respect for each other's views and backgrounds. The students were also from a variety of social, religious, and economic backgrounds, providing the potential for varied, specific, and comprehensive interactions. Both the Ensemble members and audience members fit the specific criterion of being involved in or observing the final culminating project (the concert event). The audience members who volunteered to be interviewed also proved to be information rich, providing perspectives that included psychological, personal, emotional, and logistical

views and ideas. They included administration, faculty, parents of student leaders, and parents of student participants. Including men and women, they came from varying educational and career backgrounds and had attended differing numbers of the school's concerts. Their thoughts regarding the concert event wove a rich tapestry of descriptions that included observations, perceptions, and critical awareness.

I deemed the size of my select Ensemble group appropriate for my classroom field notes and teaching journal. They were large enough to provide diverse perspectives, personalities, backgrounds, and learning styles, but small enough to be manageable. Since they met every school day, I had plenty of opportunity to work with them. The timing of their class also contributed to the quality of my field notes. Glesne (1999) argued that field notes should be written as promptly as possible, noting that "the ability to remember the details needed for field notes declines rapidly" after a day or more lapse in time. My Ensemble class was the last class before lunch, enabling me to spend my lunch time writing field notes, finishing the key points before my next class arrived. I could then read back over those key points later in the day to make refinements, add details, and potentially include personal reflections.

I also found the size of the leadership committee ideal. This small group within the Ensemble did the bulk of the planning for the concert. I did not determine the size of the leadership committee, rather, they were self-selected. Any student in Ensemble who wanted to be a student leader for this project was allowed to assume a leadership position. Four students initially volunteered, and a fifth leader decided to join leadership at a later date. Having that size of a leadership committee enabled me to be removed during the

leadership meetings and mainly observe, rather than having to partner with a single student and actively make leadership decisions. This detachment from the decision making gave me the freedom to take very detailed observation notes about those leadership meetings. However, it was not just the size that enabled that to occur, it was the particular mix of students that had volunteered. They were diverse in views and backgrounds and enjoyed exploring that diversity when working together. They respected each other and that respect shown through in their collaboration as they each took on different jobs based on their own strengths and weaknesses. Some of the students functioned more as organizers, others as creative thinkers. Two of the students took their own notes at the meetings and shared them with the other leaders. When I sent out my meeting notes, they checked that all notes agreed with each other, filling in gaps or making corrections when necessary. Table 1 describes the demographics of the student leaders.

Table 1*Student Leader Demographics*

Student	Gender	Grade Level	Family background	Religious background	Other descriptors
Steve	Male	Senior	Two-parent, nondivorced	Strong Catholic	Heterosexual, plans to pursue musical theater in college, serious student, personal struggles in the past with anxiety, heavily involved in several areas of the school
Izzy	Female	Junior	Two-parent, nondivorced	Does not actively discuss religious beliefs	Heterosexual, serious student, has experience dealing with family members experiencing addiction, heavily involved in several areas of the school
Amelia	Female	Senior	unknown	atheist	Bisexual, plans to pursue psychology in college, serious student, has personally dealt with some mental health issues, heavily involved in several areas of the school, outspoken liberal
Sophie	Female	Senior	Two-parent, nondivorced, immigrant family	Mixed religious backgrounds in family, current practice unknown	Heterosexual, college major undecided at time of research
Rob	Male	Senior	Two-parent, divorced and remarried, one parent does not live in town	Mixed religious backgrounds, still determining individual beliefs	Homosexual, plans to major in mechanical engineering and pre-med in college, heavily involved in music and theater, familiar with mental health issues

Note: To protect confidentiality, all students are identified using pseudonyms.

Gathering Participants

My observation notes and field notes were noninvasive, but I still gained consent and assent from parents and students before writing those notes to provide full transparency. For the interviews, along with gaining consent, I took extra precautions to ensure that everyone involved felt comfortable by having multiple discussions with students, being transparent regarding my research and its purpose, and reassuring students that I was first and foremost their teacher, regardless of the research I might conduct. I also gave students and parents time to learn about the research.

Bloomberg (2023) noted the importance of avoiding coercion and providing ample opportunity and time for participants to think over all research information before deciding whether or not to participate. For my Ensemble students, I made this a multi-step process. Before we began planning the concert, I described my research to my students during class and sent home information for both them and their parents to study. I also posted the information online using an approved school platform. I sent assent and consent forms home with the students, asking that they be returned in a week. Students and parents could ask me questions in person, by phone, or by email during that time. I asked all students and parents in the group to examine the assent and consent forms even if they were not interested in being interviewed, so they would be fully informed about the research.

Once the concert was complete, I then asked for student volunteers for the interviews. Even though all sixteen students in the group had parental consent to participate in the study, only four volunteered to take part in the interviews. Audience

members were also given time to reflect before deciding to participate. I explained the research on the night of the concert, before the actual concert began, and had consent forms and letters of explanation available for audience members to pick up if they were interested. I requested that audience members interested in participating in an interview contact me during the two weeks following the concert. During that time, they could contact me by phone or email with any questions. Once they decided they wanted to participate, I scheduled an interview with them and asked them to either email me their consent form or bring it with them to the interview.

I had hoped to have at least three student participant interviews, three student leader interviews, and five audience member interviews. By the time I was conducting interviews, the students were very busy with the final quarter of school, and intent on moving on with other activities and responsibilities. Only four students volunteered for interviews, two student leaders and two student participants. However, they provided rich information regarding their perceptions of the concert, their thoughts regarding the work done in class, the classroom environment, and their personal feelings regarding both the project overall and specific songs and activities. In addition, the student leaders also commented strongly on their leadership roles: how it made them feel, their responsibilities, the workload, the collaborative feel amongst the leadership group, and the importance of serving as a leader. I noticed that many of the insights within the two subsets (student leaders and student participants) were similar. Eight audience members volunteered to be interviewed, and I decided to interview all eight of them. These interviews also provided rich data, but after six of the interviews, I began to notice that

the interviewees provided very few new insights that varied from what I had already heard. Main topics brought up during the audience interviews included commentary on their personal experiences at the concert event, their perceptions of student involvement, their thoughts on the prevalence of student voice, the relevance of the subject matter, and the potential impact of the concert event.

After analyzing the data, I feel that I reached what Bloomberg (2023) described as “data saturation” for audience interviews and student leader interviews. I feel that further interviews in these two categories would have revealed few, if any, fresh insights. However, I do not believe that I reached data saturation with student participant interviews. I gathered detailed data from the student participants in the categories mentioned above, but I feel that a few more interviews could have provided additional insight into their sense of involvement, ownership, and care during the project. Table 2 provides demographic information on all interview participants.

Table 2*Interview Participant Demographics*

Name	Gender	Age	Profession	Connection to Concert
Steve	Male	Senior in high school	Student	Student leader, Ensemble member
Amelia	Female	Senior in high school	Student	Student leader, Ensemble member
James	Male	Senior in high school	Student	Ensemble member, student participant in concert
Henry	Male	Senior in high school	Student	Ensemble member, student participant in concert
Jean	Female	Middle age	Child psychologist	Parent of general chorus student (her son participated in the concert but was not part of the select Ensemble group)
Sally	Female	Senior citizen	Math teacher and department chair	Faculty at the school where the concert occurred, taught math to several of the students
Matthew	Male	Middle age	Theology teacher and head of campus ministry	Faculty at the school where the concert occurred, taught theology to some of the students, parent of one of the student leaders, married to another interview participant (Alice)
Kathy	Female	Middle age	Used to teach elementary school, now administrative assistant	Worked as administrative assistant at the school where the concert occurred, parent of one of the general chorus students (her son participated in the concert but was not part of the select Ensemble group), mother of an older son (graduate) who was a previous Ensemble member
Alice	Female	Middle age	Healthcare and nursing education	Parent of one of the student leaders, married to another interview participant (Matthew)
Anna	Female	Middle age	ex-military	Parent of general chorus student (her daughter participated in the concert but was not part of the select Ensemble group)

Name	Gender	Age	Profession	Connection to Concert
Father John	Male	Senior citizen	Headmaster of the school, teacher of theology	Head of the administration at the school where the concert occurred, has taught some of the students, close involvement with my music program in general
Jenny	Female	Middle age	Associate Professor in higher education	Parent of general chorus student (her daughter participated in the concert but was not part of the select Ensemble group)

Note: To protect confidentiality, all interview participants are identified using pseudonyms.

Data Sought

To address my research questions in this qualitative case study, I needed all three types of information described by Bloomberg (2023): contextual, demographic, and perceptual. The perceptual information played the primary role in answering my research questions, while the contextual and demographic information provided a much-needed lens through which my data could be analyzed. Table 3 illustrates the types of data collected within each information category.

Table 3

Information Types

Information Category	Types of Data Collected
Contextual	Information about the site, including existing music program, school environment, and administrative support
Demographic	Information about school achievement, information about student leaders, information about interview participants
Perceptual	Observation notes of leadership meetings, field notes from teaching, reflections, artifacts from the concert event, interviews

Research Method and Design

I began my research by identifying a problem in my choral classroom that needed to be addressed. That problem revolved around the relevance, meaningfulness, empowerment, and social awareness of my choral program for the students I teach. I knew that research into this problem was feasible according to Bloomberg's (2023) considerations: I had access to the site, I could collect the data needed, and I had the personal knowledge and resources to complete the study. I already had some background in this area in my teaching. I typically incorporated some student-chosen music, and I worked diligently to teach contextuality with all the pieces we studied. However, I felt that the classes were still not encouraging active engagement with the material and society in general. I wanted to inspire my general chorus students to use music to critically examine their world, and I hoped to empower my Ensemble members to think critically, using music to free their own voices and take action to improve the world around them. Since we produced four concerts every school year, I felt that one concert

could be solely devoted to this empowering, activist-minded goal. But to truly empower the students and connect with them, it needed to be their ideas of social justice, their critical examination of the world, and their choice of music, not mine.

As I noted in chapters 1 and 2, I discovered numerous community choirs that tackled social justice issues, but many of those experiences were not completely applicable to my situation. I liked the idea of creating dialogue with my students, but educationally we were not really set up to write all of our own music, and my students were part of a school class, not volunteers in a community choir. I had to design my own method of dialogic teaching that would fit my school, my classroom, and my students. A student planned social justice concert could potentially incorporate the numerous elements I deemed important, including dialogue, empowerment, social justice, contextuality, and care, while still being realistic and feasible in my context.

Ethical Considerations

Feasibility and educational goals were not the only points to be considered, however. When deciding to conduct research, Bloomberg (2023) argued that researchers should also consider the ethics of the research (p. 187). To ensure that the best interests of my students were kept in mind, I first met with my administration, presenting the idea to them to gauge their reaction and discuss any potential pitfalls I might have overlooked. Having worked at the school for years, I had a good relationship with the administration. They trusted me. I explained diligently all the steps I would take to protect my students from feeling pressured, exploited, or uncomfortable. To safeguard against potential underlying coercion due to my position as teacher, I ensured that student participation in

the research was strictly voluntary, with no connection to grades or ability to participate in Ensemble. Parental volunteers for interviews were accepted after the concert was complete to ensure that they did not perceive their decision to volunteer for an interview as potentially affecting a student's opportunity to perform. The atmosphere of the class and the nature of the research, which included promoting student empowerment, also helped protect the students by encouraging them to speak their minds and choose their level of participation in the project. The administration raised no objection and were very supportive of the idea, noting its potential educational benefits for the students involved. The headmaster of the school regularly encouraged cross-curricular real-world learning opportunities for our students and was particularly intrigued by this project's scope. Once I had gained the approval of my administration, I then submitted my application to IRB at Boston University, gaining the final approval to begin my research.

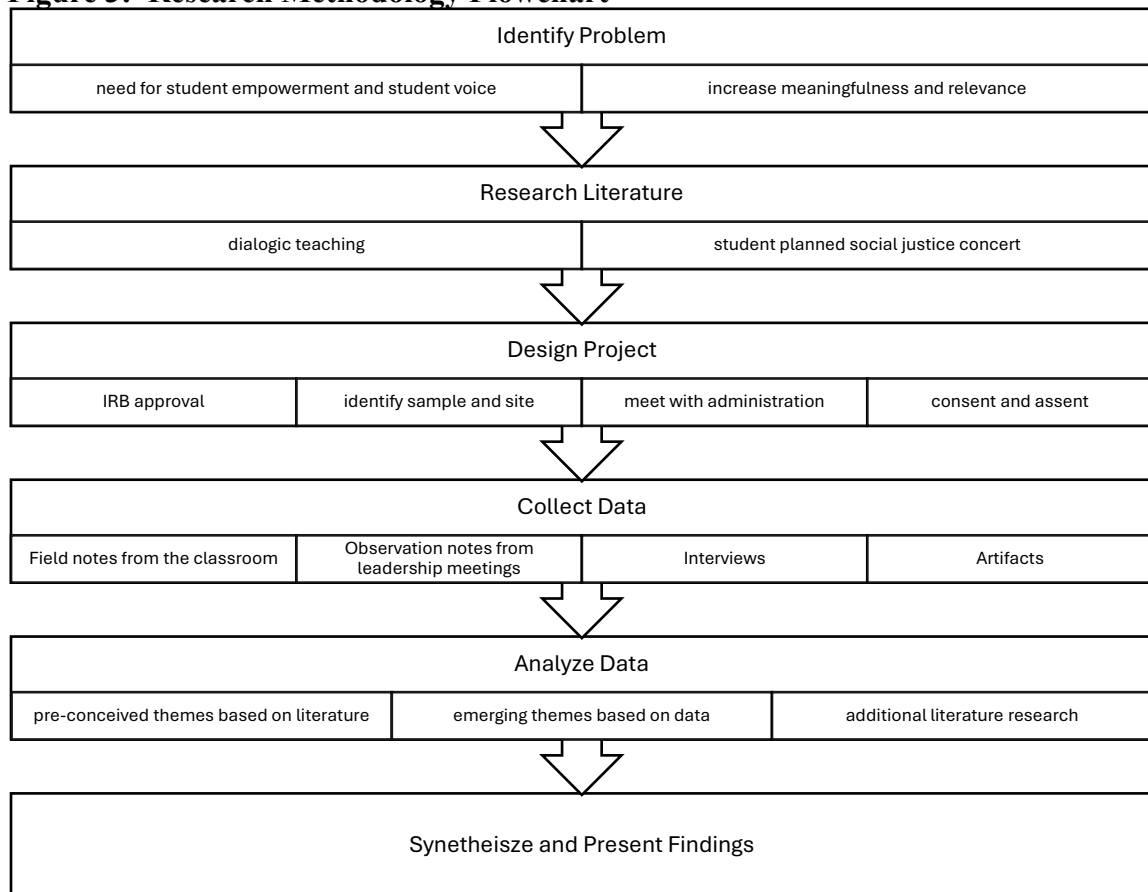
Data Collection Scheduling and Design

My data collection began in September 2023 with field notes, providing background on my teaching, the students, and the classroom environment. I began taking observation notes of the student leadership meetings in October at their first meeting. Field notes and observation notes continued until March 2024, accompanied periodically by my own reflections which I would type in a different color. As the student leaders continued their work, I adapted my own teaching to reflect their choices, adjusting lesson plans to incorporate their discussions on the contextuality of the pieces in Ensemble, adding written reflection assignments for my general chorus that integrated some of the lyrics of the songs, and following the student leaders regarding the overall concert flow

and energy. As I adjusted my teaching, I made both descriptive and reflective entries in my field notes, complying with Glesne's (1999) suggestion of ensuring that my field notes were both "descriptive and analytic" (p. 50), then following up by adding additional reflections, which I noted using a different font color to keep clear boundaries.

I completed all interviews within one month of the concert event to ensure consistency of recall amongst interview participants. I also collected copies of all concert and student-created research artifacts. I then began analyzing all the data. It was at this point in the process that I realized what the students had truly accomplished. The concert event reflected the students' vision, which was somewhat different from mine. The students had accomplished more than I could have imagined, but they had also shifted the focus away from some of my original intentions. Their focus on care was much more intense than I had anticipated, and the students' ideas of social justice and inclusion also diverged from my original thoughts. Figure 3 illustrates the basic steps of my research.

Figure 3: Research Methodology Flowchart



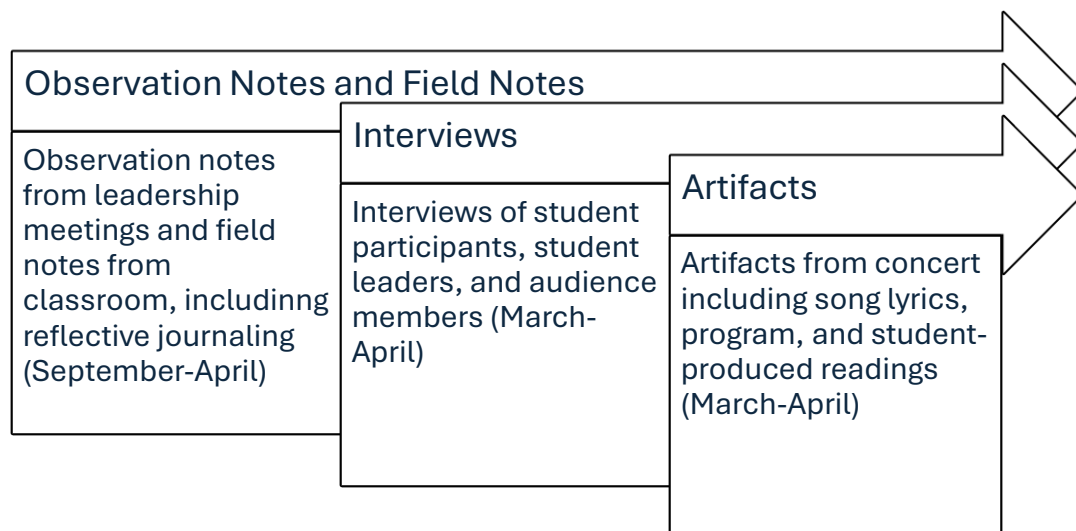
Data Collection Methods

Following the suggestions of Bloomberg (2023), Creswell and Poth (2018), and Bogdan and Biklen (2007), I employed multiple data collection methods over an extended period. I used observation notes, field notes, interviews, and artifacts as data for this study. I took a layered approach to my data collection, collecting some forms of data throughout the process while waiting until the end to gather other data. I wrote field notes and observation notes throughout the research process but did not conduct interviews until after the concert event was completed. Even though the artifacts were created at varying stages of the research, including during the planning processes and during the

concert event itself, I chose to wait to collect those artifacts until the final stage of my data collection. Figure 4 illustrates the data collection methods employed and the time frame of each.

Figure 4

Data Collection Methods with Time



This assortment of data collection methods aligns with Bloomberg’s (2023) suggestion for providing a variety of data to gain a more in-depth and complex understanding, and to support data triangulation. The field notes presented my memories, views, and interpretations of classroom events. I incorporated descriptions and reflections to increase my understanding of what went on in my own classroom, examining my practices from a new perspective and challenging my own bias and presuppositions. Glesne (1999) described this complex process in research, noting the inherent obstacles and complications, “to make the familiar strange is often more difficult because you must continually question your own assumptions and perceptions” (p. 46). I took observation notes of the student leadership meetings, focusing on the discussions within the meetings

and the interactions between the leaders. As I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, I held different positions on Glesne's (1999) participant-observer continuum in these note-taking tasks. For the field notes, I was describing the classroom experience as a teacher-participant. However, for the leadership meeting observation notes, I was much more of an observer. These different perspectives added rich layers of nuance to my data, building a foundation upon which I could then interpret and analyze my interviews. The interviews provided the primary source of data for my research, offering direct perspectives and opinions of student leaders, student participants, and adult audience members. The artifacts, gathered after the concert, provided another level of information that offered new findings and a means of triangulating existing data. I compared and contrasted all data sources to examine the material for any discrepancies or outliers.

Field Notes

My field notes were useful in studying my various teaching practices and the classroom environment in which I worked. These field notes would provide the data needed to examine my teaching style and student responses in the classroom to the dialogic learning environment as they prepared for the concert. I wrote the field notes immediately after class (during my lunch period) to keep them as accurate as possible, avoiding potential memory lapses caused by distractions or the passage of time. I read over the field notes later and wrote additional reflection notes when needed. I began writing field notes in September 2023, before I had really begun to shift my teaching to accommodate the more dialogic approach needed for the March 2024 concert, which allowed me to develop the habit of writing fieldnotes and create a general overview of the

existing classroom dynamics. Even though these field notes were written immediately following the classes (not during the class like typical observation notes), they still fulfilled the functions outlined by Bloomberg (2023) for participant observation:

- Fosters face-to-face interaction with participants
- Provides data collected in their natural setting
- Facilitates insight into complex social and cultural nuances by allowing the researcher to develop relationships with participants (p. 280)

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) argued that “becoming a researcher means internalizing the research goal while collecting data in the field” (p. 93). This was a difficult yet intriguing task in my position. Since I was already the students’ teacher, I was really more of a participant discussing my interactions and the interactions of those around me; the observer aspect was more of a shift in focus. I had to keep two sets of goals in mind, my goals as their teacher, and my goals as the researcher. I already had face-to-face contact with them and a good understanding of the environment and social culture of the group, but the field notes still offered me a different perspective by encouraging me to specifically study or observe those aspects of my classroom dynamics.

Collecting data in this manner also ensured that the data I collected, and the study itself, was not hindered by outside influences. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) noted that the first few days in the field are often characterized by “feelings of awkwardness and not belonging” (p. 91), but I did not encounter those problems. Not only were the data collected in a natural setting, but no outsiders were present to cause discomfort or disruption. To help acknowledge and identify bias, I adopted the habit of adding

reflective notes or thoughts in a different font color in my notes, making the distinction of purpose clear in my writing.

Observation Notes

I began taking the student leader observation notes in October with our first student leadership meeting. These observation notes were aligned with the above-mentioned Bloomberg (2023) purposes, but I was more clearly a participant observer (as defined by Glesne, 1999). I took these notes during the student leadership meetings as an observer who occasionally provided insight or resource knowledge. I then organized and clarified the notes, often emailing them to the student leaders. Leaders could then bring any mistakes or omitted items to my attention. Bloomberg (2023) noted the importance of member checks in research for maintaining accuracy and identifying bias. By emailing the leadership notes to the leaders and encouraging them to provide feedback, I provided an ongoing platform for regular member checks of my notes while also presenting student leaders with organized and detailed reminders of what was discussed in the meeting. Sometimes I used the notes to create subsequent reminder emails that I then sent to the student leaders, containing a description of the tasks they assigned themselves during the meeting or an update on progress.

Interviews

The observation notes and field notes were important for understanding the method of dialogic teaching I employed, the type of open and caring environment necessary for the project, and the dynamics of student interactions, but the interviews provided direct primary source perspectives and opinions from students and audience

members, making them a key component of my research. As Stake (1995) noted, the interview is the “main road to multiple realities” (p. 64). It was through the interview participants’ answers that the realities of the effects of this project unfolded. Glesne (1999) argued that “the opportunity to learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see is the special strength of interviewing in qualitative inquiry” (p. 69). I found this to be the case. The semi-structured open-ended interviews provided a means of discovering how students felt about the process, what they did and did not perceive as important, and how they interpreted specific details of the experience. Similarly, I was able to discover audience interpretations of the experience from multiple viewpoints, including parental and administrative views. Student and audience interviews revealed new perspectives I had not previously considered while also confirming some of my other assumptions. To encourage descriptive and natural interview data free from intimidation or social pressure, I established protocols for my interview process.

The first protocol I established was timeliness and confidentiality in scheduling. To ensure that the concert event was still relatively fresh in everyone’s minds, I scheduled interviews with participants as soon as possible once they had agreed to participate. I conducted all interviews within one month after the concert date and scheduled each interview according to individual interviewee convenience, allowing a large block of time for each participant so they would not feel rushed. To help preserve confidentiality, I conducted the interviews in my classroom, scheduling them on varying times and days to guard against the possibility of interviewees meeting each other in the hallway coming to

and from their interviews.

During the interviews, I needed to ascertain how parents and students felt about the concert overall and details regarding specific elements. I was concerned that leaving the interview completely open-ended and unstructured would not provide the specificity I needed in relation to my research questions, but I also did not want to come across as overly prescriptive. Bloomberg (2023) described semi-structured interviews as “balance(ing) interview questions with interview dynamics,” where the researcher plans specific interview questions and prompts but also has the freedom to follow interviewees in conversation during the interview. This was an ideal structure for my research. I created foundational questions to begin the interviews, then proceeded with follow-up prompts based on interviewees’ responses, all while keeping the interactions as conversational as possible to put everyone at ease.

My pre-determined interview questions can be found in Appendix B. Although all interview questions were designed to gather data to answer my research questions, I created different interview questions for audience members and students, writing the questions with Kvale’s (1996) modes of understanding as a foundation. For audience members, I first asked questions centered on their personal feelings connected to the concert event, then progressed toward their perceptions of the students. Since these audience members were all closely connected to the students in various ways (parent, teacher, administrator), they each felt they had special insight about student involvement and participation. For students, I asked about their perceptions and feelings regarding the concert event, the rehearsals, and the planning processes, encouraging them to expand

their focus outward to discuss potential and perceived effects of the experience on others if they wished.

In designing the interview questions, I strove to create open-ended questions that would address my research questions and encourage discussion in those areas. To ascertain thoughts on meaningfulness and relevance for all interviewees, I asked both students and audience members about any personal connections they had with the concert material, encouraging elaboration and specificity. I also asked both groups to compare this concert experience with other school concert experiences, to more firmly establish potential differences. To discover the perception of the prevalence of student voice and empowerment, I asked audience members about their awareness of student input and views during the concert experience. For student data in that same area, I asked about their personal experiences during the project and their ideas regarding the power dynamics involved. These questions led to discussions centered around ownership, empowerment, and “being heard.”

During the interviews, I strove to follow Kvale’s (1996) advice and follow up on any implied meanings in the moment to “obtain an immediate confirmation or disconfirmation of the interviewer’s interpretation of what the interviewee is saying” (p. 32), which proved quite fruitful. Often, through repeating what an interviewee stated and asking for elaboration, I was provided with both confirmation and additional insight. I also embraced what Kvale (1996) described as the “interpersonal situation” (p. 35) between myself and each interviewee. I guided each interview with my questions, but I followed interviewees’ leads regarding flow, stopping to discuss something tangential or

shifting the order of questions based on the direction of the conversation. Depending on the interview, we laughed, joked, or reflected as guided by the interviewee. As interviewees discussed their ideas and views during the interviews, the process of reflecting caused some individuals to come to new realizations, a process akin to Kvale's (1996) idea of a change in the modes of understanding. These revelations during interviews resulted in some interviewees choosing to revisit material before concluding the interview, referencing or clarifying a statement they had made earlier. Asking interviewees if they had anything they wanted to add or clarify at the end of each interview usually resulted in simple repetition of information, but there were occasions when new perspectives or nuances were revealed.

Bloomberg (2023) argued that, "although extremely tedious, transcribing your interviews yourself is one way of immersing yourself in your data and becoming more familiar with it" (p. 329), so I chose to transcribe the interviews myself. I recorded all interviews (both video and audio), and then used those recordings to help ensure accuracy, checking my transcription with both recordings. Based on my understanding of the standards for transcription presented by Kvale (1996), I determined it was best to include each hesitation in the interview to show potential hesitations and possible changes in emotion. I transcribed the words of each interview verbatim and noted any important body language.

Artifacts

Glesne (1999) argued that one's "understanding of a phenomenon grows as you make use of the documents and artifacts that are a part of people's lives" (p. 59). In this

research, collecting and analyzing artifacts that were part of the concert helped increase my understanding and corroborated many of my other data. I collected the artifacts after the concert event. These artifacts included concert programs, song lyrics, concert readings, participant answers from one of the interactive lobby activities, and the PowerPoint slides created by the students to show to the audience members. Most of these artifacts were created by students, and the few that weren't were heavily influenced by students (students primarily chose songs based on their lyrics) or created by audience members (from the interactive lobby exhibit).

Data Security

Bloomberg (2023) suggested that researchers should “consider all possible ways that data security can be breached and compromised, including who might have access to your data and why” (p. 45). From the beginning stages of planning my research, I studied such considerations carefully. I kept hard copies of all data in a secure location in my private home as a backup, but my main data storage was on my personal computer. Protected by a personal identification number, this laptop was only accessed by me and was up to date on all malware and anti-virus software. I stored the electronic files of all documents in my password protected OneDrive, with a backup of some of the raw data also stored in my password protected Google Drive. I conducted the video recordings of the interviews using a video camera with a dedicated SD card, and made the audio recordings using my phone, which was also password protected. I downloaded the raw recordings onto my computer, storing them in password protected files, then deleted them off my phone. The SD card from the video camera was stored securely in my private

home. I used pseudonyms in all data analysis to protect the privacy of those involved and named and filed the interviews according to a number system, with the cross reference between names and numbers stored separately. I chose to transcribe all interviews myself rather than making use of a transcription service, so no raw data was ever presented to an individual outside of the study. When conducting member checks regarding those interview transcriptions, I sent individual emails through a password protected email server to each interviewee.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

With substantial amounts of data to analyze, organization was crucial (Bloomberg, 2023). I developed a naming system for all my data, allowing me to easily find it on my computer. I kept all field notes on a single document, with each new date serving as the heading for a new section. For my observation notes on leadership meetings, I made each meeting a separate document, titled according to the meeting date. As noted previously, I titled interview transcriptions according to a numbering system I developed. Once I began coding the data, I saved the originals and made copies, adding “coding copy 1” or “coding copy 2” to the original title to delineate and organize each analysis version of the numerous pieces of data.

I wrote field notes immediately following class, but then, following Bloomberg’s (2023) suggestion of making data analysis “an inherent and ongoing part of the research” (p. 326), I read back over my field notes for additional reflection and analysis. As noted previously, I typed any reflective notes in a different color, which allowed me to quickly scan my work and determine what was original data and what was early analysis. It was

through these reflections that I slowly honed my field note skills. The earlier field notes contained much extraneous material that was irrelevant to my research. However, after reflecting on my earlier field notes, I was able to later write more focused and specific accounts of class periods.

My observation notes of leadership meetings were much easier to write and were easily divided according to each meeting's agenda, which made coding and analysis of these notes simpler than the field notes. I typed the observation notes during the leadership meetings but then added further details once the meeting was finished, clarifying observations and adding specific descriptions I had not had time to type during the meeting. It was through this rereading and additive process that I was able to indicate more specificity regarding the leaders' decision-making processes. When analyzing these meeting notes, I found that my additional observation details provided insight into student decision-making and collaboration processes.

Deductive and Inductive Analysis

When analyzing my data, I used both deductive and inductive reasoning as described by Bloomberg (2023). I conducted multiple rounds of coding of all data, progressing from field notes, through leadership meeting observation notes, and finishing with artifacts and interviews. For my first round of coding, I used a theory-driven "top-down" deductive approach (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 330) on my field notes, observation notes, and interviews. I began with codes I had created based on the literature I had read and my research questions, adding additional codes when necessary. Because of my desire to focus on details and specificity in this coding round, I made my codes very

distinct. I will present more detail in chapter 4, but for each research question I created codes that represented different potential presentations of the desired trait (such as meaningfulness or relevance). My research and personal experience into meaningfulness suggested that meaningfulness could be expressed through demonstrating importance, expressing a sense of ownership or investment, and through personal engagement or emotional connection. Therefore, I created meaningfulness codes for each of those categories, adding subcoding categories within each to specify whether it was something personally expressed or witnessed in another person. Similarly, for relevance, I created codes for varying types of relevance which included relatedness to surroundings and relatedness to future benefits, with subcategories in each. While meticulous, this coding round provided me with a very thorough view of the intricacies within the data.

For the first round of coding of the artifacts (song lyrics, concert readings, PowerPoint slides, concert program, and lobby activities), I still wanted to use deductive reasoning, but I realized I needed to create different codes than those used for the field notes, observation notes, and interviews. The student leaders were not aware of my research questions, yet the goals they established were intertwined with my research questions, so I decided to create codes based on their goals. This would give me an opportunity to analyze artifacts through the lens of their goals and perspectives, which would hopefully provide me with better insight. It also allowed me to incorporate a form of dialogue into my analysis. I will discuss these goals in more detail later, but as part of the analysis process, I grouped them according to four categories: awareness, the reality of mental health issues, acceptance, and help or support. Since these four goals were

approached in numerous ways, I created numerous subcategories to provide differentiation. I present these codes and the data they provided in chapter 4. After completing round 1 coding of the artifacts, I realized that the student leaders had stayed very consistent with their goals. This resulted in the goals permeating the concert event. Such data could mean that the goals were prevalent in the leadership meetings as well, so I conducted an additional coding copy of all the leadership meeting observations using the student goal codes.

For the final round of coding, I wanted to use more of an inductive approach, looking for patterns and meaning within the data through a more “bottoms-up” manner of analysis (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 330). I had scrutinized the details of the data based on preconceived ideas, and that coding was producing a unique composite view of the data, but now I needed to shift perspectives. Rather than beginning by looking at the individual parts, I chose to look at the data as a whole unit. I reread through each data set (field notes, observation notes, interviews, and artifacts) in its entirety, taking notes of the main ideas, themes, and significant points of each. Then I highlighted any quotes or sentences that particularly stood out to me. This approach allowed me to gain a better understanding of the larger meaning of the data, while also providing space to explore new perspectives or ideas that I had previously not considered. Various themes and main ideas emerged during this inductive process, which I will present in chapter 4. After completing all rounds of coding, I was then able to compare and contrast my findings. Following the suggestions of Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), I triangulated the interview data with data from other sources (in this case the observation notes, field notes, and artifacts). This

helped me clarify the meanings of the different realities found within the data. I also compared the findings between the deductive and inductive analysis processes, looking for commonalities and discrepancies.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Because this research involved my own classroom, transparency was a key component in establishing trustworthiness. Although not always formal in nature, openness with the community in which I teach was critical, whether it was a discussion of methods, a description of my research, casual conversations with parents and students about my dissertation in general, or casual question and answer sessions with students. In addition to transparency, I addressed trustworthiness through the four areas recommended by Bloomberg (2023): credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability.

Credibility and Confirmability

I addressed credibility and confirmability through multiple methods, the first of which was triangulation. From the very beginning, my data collection plan included data and methodological triangulation. By collecting data from interviews, field notes, observation notes, and artifacts, I was able to compare and contrast data from multiple sources. Since the field notes and observation notes were taken over several months, I was also able to compare data over time.

I also administered member checks whenever possible. I sent each interview participant a copy of my transcription and asked them to either confirm its accuracy or note any discrepancies or changes that needed to occur. I conducted these member checks within two weeks of each interview to help ensure that interviewees had as accurate a

recollection as possible of the interview. The adults all quickly replied and other than some spelling errors, no corrections were needed. I had to explain the member check process to the students. They did not find any errors. After conducting some of the analysis, I discussed it with one of the leaders as another accuracy check, making sure my interpretation of the data matched his interpretation. He found no misinterpretation. As I mentioned earlier, I also conducted member checks of my observation notes from the leadership meetings by emailing those notes out to the leaders and encouraging them to compare and contrast those notes with the ones they had taken.

Finally, I monitored my own biases by keeping reflective memos and journal writing. In my field notes, I typed all reflections in a different font color to clearly separate them from the rest of the notes. I also kept a separate journal during the analysis process. I wrote down any thoughts, reflections, summations, biases, or other mental processes. This encouraged greater self-awareness, which was very beneficial considering my close connections to the research and the students. I was cognizant of my reasoning and logic processes, always striving for consistency and quality; attentive to my organizational methods, watching for any pitfalls or errors; and mindful of my emotions and potential bias, rereading my reflective memos and making any needed adjustments. By embracing such practices, I felt I improved my ability to analyze the data and draw conclusions.

Dependability

The multiple coding processes I employed helped establish dependability. I was able to compare the themes that emerged from my inductive coding to the application of

the codes I used during the deductive coding process. I also compared those results to the goals established by the student leaders and the narrative analysis (using those student goals) of the song lyrics and concert readings. Through this cross comparison, I revealed an interrelatedness between the various data points and analysis methods that demonstrated dependability.

The emergent themes discovered in the inductive analysis and the codes used in the deductive and narrative analysis processes were also closely linked to my research questions. I present the interconnectedness between the various codes and the research questions in more detail in chapter 4. The various overlapping areas allowed for dependable and deep analysis of the data. The rich depth of the data combined with the varied types of data collected also contributed to the dependability.

Transferability

As described earlier, this research occurred in a private school setting with a group of select vocal Ensemble students. There are, however, many elements that could be applicable to other teaching scenarios and students. It is my hope that by studying the thick descriptions of the school, teaching, and students involved, readers will be able to make their own determination regarding transferability, deciding for themselves what is applicable in their own classrooms (Stake, 1995).

Researcher Positionality

My passion for this project was strong, which naturally affected my positionality and potential bias, as did my position as researcher and teacher. I was concerned about my potential power and influence over the students during the project affecting my

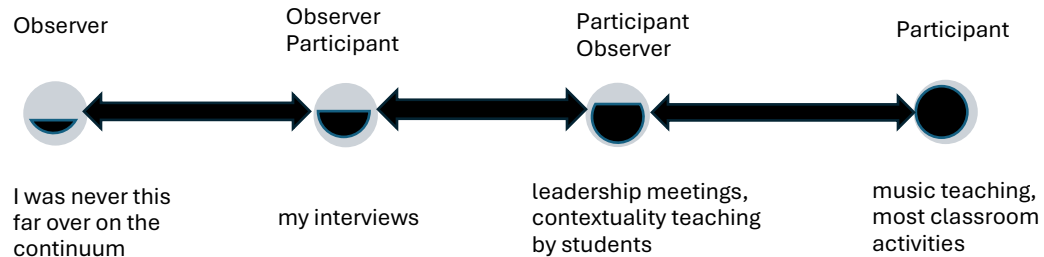
research. I was also worried that I would be overwhelmed by the research element and not be as effective as an educator. While my concerns were real, my data and interactions with the students demonstrated that I need not have been worried to such an extensive degree. By encouraging me to examine my own teaching from multiple perspectives, my research made me a better educator. I was more aware of the purpose behind my actions, and I found a way to increase my attentiveness to my students. In addition, as I will subsequently explain, the effects of my positionality and power over my students were not as strong as I would have predicted.

My passion for the project proved to have less influence than I anticipated. Since I already had a good rapport with my students, I expected my feelings for the project to greatly increase their enthusiasm, but I overestimated either my influence or their need for it. Yes, it did have a positive effect on them, but their intensity and passion were as strong as mine, so it was much more of a shared feeling than a one-sided persuasion. Their positivity influenced me as much as I influenced them. It was an element of shared power dynamics and emotional dialog that I had not anticipated. They had chosen the topic so their feelings for it provided the foundation, not mine.

As I noted earlier, my positionality in this research moved back and forth along Glesne's (1999) participant-observer continuum. I found that I inhabited different places on that continuum depending on the type of data I was collecting. Figure 5 illustrates my interpretation of my various positions on that continuum during my data collection.

Figure 5

My Position as a Participant and Observer in this Research



Understanding my position on that continuum for the various types of data collection helped me keep track of potential bias and influence. For my teaching field notes, I was on the far right of the continuum, a full participant who wrote observations and reflections. As the teacher, I fully participated and even led the music teaching aspects with the group, so my notes reflect my actions and influence on my students and their response to that. For the observation notes of the leadership meetings and the contextuality teaching led by the student leaders, I was a little closer to the middle of the continuum. I occasionally inserted in comments or clarified things, but was not in control of the meetings, making me a participant observer on the continuum. Yes, I was still technically a participant in the group, but I had very little power or say. Instead, I worked more as a resource to be called upon when needed. My observation notes from these experiences reflected more student power and collaboration than the field notes, with notably less influence from me. For the interviews, I was more to the left of center on Glesne's (1999) continuum. I had some pre-established questions, but I also freely interacted with the interviewees in as non-leading a manner as possible to encourage

them to provide deeper insight and more detail in their answers. In that sense, I was mainly an observer, only participating to help them express their views in a relational manner. My data from the interviews demonstrates even less power and influence by me, solely focused instead on the views and opinions of the interviewees.

Regarding power dynamics, there is a traditional hierarchy involved with being a teacher, and I was very aware of that in my research. As I mentioned earlier, I took great care to ensure that students and parents did not feel coerced or otherwise pressured to participate or act in any specific manner. However, I did not anticipate the manner in which my teaching methodology for this project would change my classroom overall. One of the unanticipated outcomes of the research was a long-term shift in power dynamics within my classroom. My dialogic teaching for this project included shared power dynamics, and that shared power changed aspects of the student teacher relationship. The students retained their ease and sense of power even after the concert was finished, which provided more trustworthy and rich data during the interviews. The students showed no difficulties in expressing their opinions and views during the interviews, including offering critiques.

Chapter Summary

I had three research questions guiding my study, one primary research question and two secondary research questions. The research I conducted was considered a qualitative instrumental case study, meeting Creswell and Poth's (2018) criteria for case studies, with the purpose of gaining in-depth, rich information over an extended period of time about a dialogic choral teaching approach and the resulting student-led social justice

concert event. The potential understandings gained from the research aligned with the goals of case study research set by Stake (1995).

The research site was a private Augustinian Catholic school in the midwestern United States that is well known for its successful graduates. Elite, high-achieving, well-rounded, and service oriented, the students that graduate from the school have a 100% college matriculation rate, and many go on to pursue high profile successful careers. The student diversity has increased over the years, as have the number of service opportunities and extracurricular activities pursued by the student body, which are quite varied and numerous. The position of the fine arts within the school is subordinate yet respected, and there is an ongoing effort to individualize instruction and keep music both challenging and relevant to the various students involved. The select Ensemble choral group responsible for planning the concert that serves as the culminating event of this research was a small, close-knit, audition-only group well known for its high-performance expectations and leadership within the school. As their teacher, I naturally tend towards relational care, relevancy, and high expectations in my classroom.

I was purposeful in my selection of participants so I could ensure that both the site and the participants met the necessary conditions for successful research. My participant groups were homogeneous, intense, and criteria-based, and included the Ensemble students (which contained both student participants and student leaders) and various adult audience members (including parents, faculty members, and an administrator of the school). The demographics of interviewees contained a variety of backgrounds and life experiences.

To adequately conduct this research, I needed contextual, demographic, and perceptual information. To gather this information ethically, my research design included consideration of the feasibility and goals of the research, along with numerous checks and balances designed to protect my students. I began my data collection in September 2023 with field notes, which I continued throughout the duration of the research project. I wrote my observation notes of the leadership meetings during some of those same months. I conducted interviews during the final months of my research after the concert's completion. I also collected artifacts after the concert's completion.

I aligned my data collection methods with Bloomberg's (2023) suggestions of gathering data that would support triangulation. Both the field notes and the observation notes met Bloomberg's (2023) requirements for participant observation, but since these field notes and observation notes were about my own students, I tried to stay diligent in being reflective and acknowledging bias. Both the field notes and observation notes provided foundational material upon which to examine my interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, allowing me to expand upon answers, ask for more detail or elaboration, or explore tangential material as needed during the interview process. To finish the triangulation process, I also collected artifacts, which were either student-created or student-influenced.

I used both deductive and inductive processes during data analysis. As part of the deductive process, I developed coding categories based on my theoretical research, which I then applied to my data. However, I also conducted a purely inductive round of coding, looking for emerging themes and ideas. I also applied narrative analysis to the concert

readings and song lyrics. In addition, after recognizing the importance of the student leader goals for the concert, I conducted another round of coding, applying the student goals to data. I then compared and contrasted the results from the various coding processes.

I considered transparency a key component of maintaining trustworthiness in my research. I addressed credibility and confirmability through varying methods of triangulation, member checks, and personal monitoring of my own bias. The multiple coding processes I used helped increase dependability.

Because this research was conducted in my own classroom, I was faced with numerous ethical considerations. I made every effort to protect my students and my research, including gaining IRB approval, obtaining informed assent and consent, having open conversations with administration, striving for transparency with students and parents, and conducting member checks. My positionality in this research was also complex but clearly defined for each aspect of the research. I worked to minimize the influence of classroom hierarchy on the study, maintained good records, and kept ongoing reflections.

I recount the outcomes of this research in the following chapters. In chapter 4, I discuss the findings, presenting detail regarding the various coding rounds and the resulting data. I elaborate upon those findings in chapter 5, providing more in-depth analysis and synthesis of the data. I also connect my findings to the various theoretical foundations that inspired and informed my project. I conclude by describing areas of potential future research and offering final personal reflections.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents key findings from the data. Guided by the research questions, these findings focus on three key elements: 1) the meaningfulness and relevance of the concert event, 2) the shift in power dynamics in the planning process, and 3) the presence and impact of the student goals, which demonstrated storytelling through student voice. As noted in the previous chapter, I collected data from September 2023 until April 2024. The sources of data included field notes from class instruction, observation notes from leadership meetings, interviews, and artifacts. I conducted interviews with eight audience members, two student participants, and two student leaders.

After collecting data, I analyzed them using inductive and deductive methods (Bloomberg, 2023). I then compared and contrasted the coding results. My resulting analysis showed that the different data sources interacted in numerous ways, sometimes functioning as primary evidence while other times providing secondary or supporting evidence. I found meaningfulness and relevance data primarily through interviews and artifacts, with some supporting evidence from my field notes and observation notes. I encountered data regarding power dynamics in both field notes and observation notes, with supporting evidence located in interviews. I uncovered data describing the presence and impact of student goals and the stories they told through artifacts, supported by observation notes and interviews.

To discuss these findings, I present a brief overview of the concert event and planning process to assist in contextualizing the data, then briefly review the research

questions before presenting the findings. I divide the findings into three large sections. The first section presents the various codes and themes used in my analysis, the second section addresses findings related to the primary research question, and the third section presents findings connected to the secondary research questions. When presenting the findings, I often divide the data up according to source type, presenting artifact data, field notes and observation note data, and interview data separately to emphasize the content of each data type without oversimplifying its role in the larger data triangulation. Although imperfect, this format weaves a more detailed picture of the data that will later be brought into focus in Chapter 5.

Contextualizing the Data

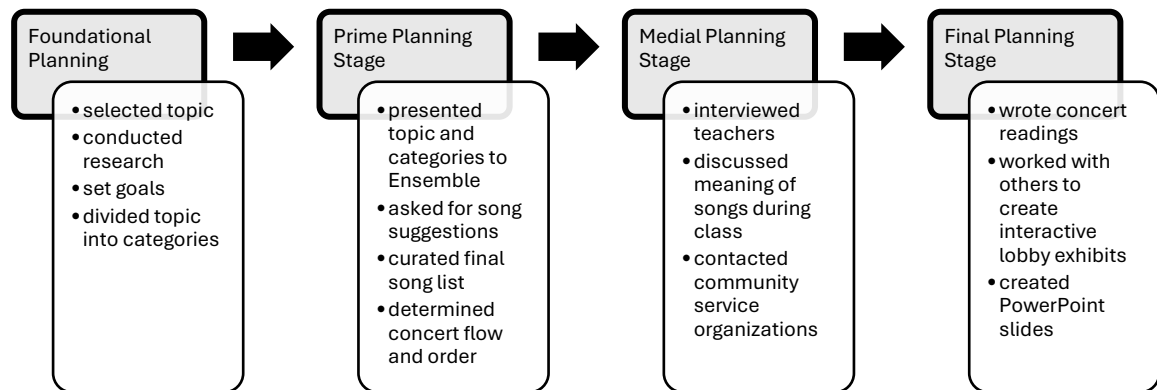
Since the planning process and concert event were unique to this study, I begin my discussion by presenting a detailed overview to assist in contextualizing the data. The planning process was not the standard top-down approach commonly found in many US choral classrooms. Rather, it was driven and controlled primarily by the students. The performance was also atypical. As I will explain, I choose to refer to it as a concert event rather than simply a choir concert, shifting the focus from a music performance product to the more justice-driven and meaning-focused experience created by the students that included music, readings, meaning-making, and support.

The Planning Process

The student selected leadership committee was in charge of the concert event planning, a process that occurred in several steps and from which I obtained data throughout. Figure 6 depicts this planning process, which I then explain in more detail.

Figure 6

The Student Leaders' Planning Process



The student leaders selected the topic (mental health) early, then conducted their research of the topic in the fall, discussing their findings with me and with each other. They then determined their goals for the concert, which influenced every aspect of their planning. These goals were so prevalent in the artifacts that I chose to create a separate coding category based on them, adding a new component to my data analysis plan so I could better understand the students' choices. They decided that the topic was best presented by dividing the concert into sections, with each section focusing on a different mental health aspect or condition.

The leaders used these topics and concert sections when they presented their research to the rest of the Ensemble class late in the fall semester and asked for song suggestions, receiving over seventy song submissions. The song selection process, which took place during the winter, was very focused on content, with the student leaders intensely studying the song lyrics of the suggested songs. Because of this strong emphasis and intention placed upon the lyrics, the lyrics of the songs chosen by the leadership

committee became artifacts that I later studied as part of the data. The meaning of the lyrics continued to be discussed throughout the rehearsal process, with non-leader Ensemble members contributing and often refining the collective interpretation of the words. The student leaders also determined the final concert order and flow for the concert, purposely planning moments of climax and impact.

During planning, student leaders also interviewed teachers at the school to gain their perspectives on student mental health, reinforcing and expanding their own ideas regarding the perceptions and issues of mental health within their school environment and amongst the school's student population. However, the student leaders also wanted the impact of the concert to expand beyond the school, so during the early spring two of the leaders reached out to various community service organizations, bringing relevant information back to the rest of the leaders for discussion. The leaders decided to work with a local organization that served families and children dealing with mental health and poverty issues. The entire Ensemble volunteered with this organization and also named them as benefactors to the concert, asking audience members to bring donations of suggested items to the concert event (monetary donations were also accepted).

Finally, the leadership committee coordinated with the visual arts teachers to create displays and interactive exhibits in the lobby before the concert, and the leaders wrote various readings that were presented during the concert, adding context to the experience for the audience members. All of the Ensemble members worked to create PowerPoint slides about each song to be displayed on the big screen before the concert, with the leadership committee adding additional slides as needed to fill in any gaps in

information about each song.

The Concert Event

The various additions to the performance created a larger concert event, more involved and elaborate than the concerts we usually produced, which were more akin to a traditional US high school choir concert with a passive audience watching a formal performance of director-chosen music. The students' prolonged and intense involvement with the concert topic created a different atmosphere that was more emotionally intense and hands-on than what they were used to as performers. The student leaders strove to provide a different experience for audience members as well, with multiple spaces and methods available to interact with the concert topic material and explore mental health through various perspectives.

As audience members entered the lobby of the school's performing arts center, they were greeted by Ensemble members. Audience members bringing a donation to the community organization could drop off their donated items at the donation table, staffed by a student leader and two other Ensemble members. After receiving the donations, students then encouraged audience members to participate in the hands-on activities found throughout the lobby area. The interactive exhibits created by the school's visual arts teachers each had a different focus, one focused on happiness and the other on community. Ensemble leaders also led an interactive activity. They invited audience members to use sticky notes to answer the question "How are you?" and then put those sticky notes up on the windows that formed the side wall of the lobby. Student participants were also encouraged to participate in the lobby activities if they had time.

Once audience members left the lobby and entered the auditorium, they were able to pick up paper copies of the program and find their seats. The program provided more than simple information about what music would be performed; the descriptive title and the various subheadings provided hints regarding the mental health topics to be explored, and the mention of the community organization let audience members know more about the overall scope of the event. More introductory contextual background information was provided through the PowerPoint slides. From their seats, audience members could read the PowerPoint slides projected up on the screen at the front of the auditorium. These slides, created by Ensemble members, depicted background information and student perspectives or connections about each song that would be performed that evening.

At the beginning of the performance part of the evening, I offered a few introductory remarks then relinquished control of the evening to the student leaders. A copy of the full program can be found in Appendix A, but the basic sections of the concert, the song titles, and a brief description of each reading are listed in Table 4. All concert readings were delivered by a student and prepared in advance by a student leader except for the reading in the self-harm section, which was written and delivered by a theology teacher at the school, and my concluding remarks.

Table 4⁷*You Are Not Alone – Shining A Light On Mental Health: Concert Sections*

Section	Reading/Spoken Component	Songs/Musical Component
Shining A Light On Mental Health	Conversational with audience, emotional, included student goals	“Will I” “Save Me”
A Spotlight on Anxiety	Emotional (with a personal element) and informative	“In My Blood” “Lifeboat” “Monday, Monday”
A Spotlight on Burnout	Descriptive and informative	“Old Man” “This Is Me Trying” “Getting Older”
A Spotlight on Depression	Descriptive and emotional (not necessarily personal)	“What Was I Made For” “Young and Sad”
Bringing Light Into the Darkness	Conversational with audience, emotional, impactful	“Rescue”
A Spotlight on Loneliness	Descriptive and informative, but with personal elements	“Need You Now” “Waving Through A Window”
A Spotlight on Body- Image & Self-Perception	Descriptive with some personalization	“Man in the Mirror” “Pretty Isn’t Pretty”
Bringing Others Into The Light	Personalized through use of quotes and examples	“Anonymous Ones”
Shattering the Darkness on Self-Harm	This reading was not done by a student leader — the theology faculty member delivered it like a mini sermon	“How To Save A Life”
Keeping the Light Shining	Conversational with audience, hopeful and emotional	“Keep Holding On” “I’m Still Standing” “Louder Than Words”
Concluding Remarks	I offered a quote by one of the students and related relevance to the school community then introduced the student leaders	

⁷ Regarding in-text citations for musical selections: To keep the table spacing clear and easy to read, I have omitted the in-text citations for the song titles in this and all subsequent tables. However, all song titles within regular text are cited and I strongly encourage readers to review the full reference entries of all musical works in the reference list at the end of this dissertation to become better acquainted the writers of these musical numbers.

Once the performance part of the evening ended, audience members left the auditorium but had an additional final experience available to them in lobby. As a last encounter with mental health topics, audience members were able to re-examine the interactive lobby activities from before the concert and make monetary donations to the community service organization if they wished, but there was a new component, the offer of help for them personally. The school counselor was available to speak with anyone who needed assistance. In addition, one of the Ensemble leaders was stationed at an information table with pamphlets and helplines for anyone who wanted to reach out for mental health support.

Findings

I have organized the findings according to the primary and secondary research questions. The primary research question was:

- How did students and audience members experience meaningfulness and relevance of a student-led social justice concert that was the product of a dialogic choral project?

The secondary questions were:

- In what ways, if any, did students feel that the dialogic power dynamics between teacher and students affected the classroom and learning?
- In what ways, if any, did students feel that their goals for the project promoted student voice and empowerment through storytelling?

To address these research questions, I incorporated multiple rounds of coding, using first deductive analysis strategies, then inductive processes. I then compared and contrasted

the findings from each round of coding. These coding processes resulted in a substantial amount of data, but careful examination of that data is necessary for understanding the final outcome, so all relevant data tables have been included within chapter 4.

Coding and Themes Emerging Through Deductive and Inductive Analysis

Processes

In this section I discuss the coding related to my first research question, noting both the top-down deductive codes (Bloomberg, 2023) I created and the more organic inductive themes that emerged (Bloomberg, 2023; Stake, 1995). These codes focus on the various representations of meaningfulness and relevance contained within my data. To clearly differentiate between the different data contexts, I divide the meaningfulness and relevance data into two subsections. In the first subsection, I address the meaningfulness and relevance found in concert artifacts such as song lyrics and readings, while in the second subsection I present the meaningfulness and relevance data from the interviews, supported by field notes and observation notes evidence.

As I noted in Chapter 3, for my deductive analysis I first created codes that, based upon my theoretical research, I felt would reflect the various possible representations and presentations of data that would address my research questions. I wanted to gain as thorough an understanding as possible of both the depth and breadth of my data during this first round of analysis, so I used these codes to analyze my interviews, field notes, and observation notes, saving the analysis of artifacts until I had a clearer picture of the type of analysis needed. The deductive codes used in this first round reflected: variations on meaningfulness, relevance, engagement (potential secondary indicator of

meaningfulness or relevance), student empowerment, the learning environment (potential data on care, dialogue, power dynamics, meaningfulness, or student empowerment), communication (evidence of dialogue and shared power dynamics), student investment (potential indicator of meaningfulness, relevance, or student empowerment), response to the concert (potential indicator of meaningfulness or relevance), critiques, and teaching practices (potential data regarding care, dialogue, power dynamics, and student empowerment). By providing a wide variety of codes, each with specific subcategories that detailed who was involved, whether it was experienced personally or observed, and the context, I was able to dig into the data on a deep and detailed level. Tables 5, 6, 7, and 8 list the codes I created for this round of coding. Tables 5 focuses on direct evidence of relevance, meaning, and communication across barriers (thereby implying meaning-making or relevance).

Table 5

Deductive Analysis Coding Categories and Subcategories in Relevance, Meaning, and Communication for Field Notes, Observation Notes, and Interviews

Coding Category	Code	Coding Subcategory	Code
Relevance	R	Student Participant	R/SP
		Student Leader	R/SL
		Audience Parent	R/AP
		Audience Faculty or Administration	R/AF; R/AA
Finding meaning/ personal meaning	PM	Personal meaning through song	PM/S
		Personal meaning through reading	PM/R
		Personal meaning through listening	PM/L
		Personal meaning through discussion	PM/D
Communication/ crossing barriers	CCB	Perceived by audience	CCB/A
		Felt by participant	CCB/P
		Felt by leader	CCB/L

To provide more context for the data, Table 6 provides various coding categories relating to the environment and setting.

Table 6

Deductive Analysis Coding Categories and Subcategories Related to Environment in Field Notes, Observation Notes, and Interviews

Coding Category	Code	Coding Subcategory	Code
Environment of classroom	ECL	Power dynamics	ECL/PD
		Connection with each other	ECL/CO
		Routine	ECL/R
Environment of concert	ECO	Differences from previous concerts	ECO/DPC
		Personal connection - audience	ECO/PC
		Atmosphere - audience	ECO/AA
		Atmosphere - student	ECO/AS
Environment of leadership committee	ELC	No subcategories	None
Setting and background	SB	No subcategories	None

Table 7 illustrates coding related to power dynamics, including my method of instruction, decision-making processes, and leadership member interactions.

Table 7

Deductive Analysis Coding Categories and Subcategories for Shared Power and Instruction in Field Notes, Observation Notes, and Interviews

Coding Category	Code	Coding Subcategory	Code
Shared power dynamics	PD	Within leadership committee	PD/LC
		Student leaders involving others	PD/LCO
My instruction/teaching	MT	Typical instruction – more monologic	MIT
		Atypical instruction – more dialogic	MAT
Decision-making processes by leadership committee	D	Complete group agreement from the start	D/CG
		Combination of group and individual decisions – group comes to agreement after discussions	D/GI
		Individual decision only	D/IO

Table 8 focuses on categories related to response, engagement, and benefits, including any acknowledgement of after-effects from the concert event and any critiques offered by research participants.

Table 8

Deductive Analysis Coding Categories and Subcategories Relating to Response and Engagement Data in Field Notes, Observation Notes, and Interviews

Coding Category	Code	Coding Subcategory	Code
Response	RE	Student participant	RE/SP
		Student leader	RE/SL
		Audience – parent	RE/AP
		Audience – faculty or administration	RE/AF RE/AA
Engagement	EN	Of student/felt by student	EN/S
		Of student/perceived by audience parent	EN/PAP
		Of student/perceived by audience faculty or administration	EN/PAF EN/PAA
		Of student/perceived by other student	EN/PSS
		Of student/observed or perceived by me	EN/MS
		Of audience/felt by audience parent	EN/AP
		Of audience/felt by audience faculty or administration	EN/AF EN/AA
		Of audience/perceived by other audience	EN/APA
		Of audience/perceived by student	EN/PAS
After effects	AE	Within internal community (school, family)	AE/C
		External community, outside of school or family	AE/OC
Critiques	C	By student leaders	C/SL
		By student participants	C/SP
		By audience parent	C/AP
		By audience faculty or administration	C/AF C/AA
Other educational benefits	ED	No subcategories	None

Coding Category	Code	Coding Subcategory	Code
Audience relates to students	ARS	No subcategories	None
Students relate to audience	SRA	No subcategories	None
Student sense of ownership, investment	O	By student leader	SLO
		By student participant	SPO
		Of student, perceived by audience	PASO

The theoretically based deductive codes I used for my first round of coding of the interviews, field notes, and observation notes were not as applicable to the artifacts. Because of the student leaders' intense focus and care regarding the song lyrics, the PowerPoint slides, the readings, and the concert program, these artifacts represented a strong reflection of their views and perspectives. To better analyze those perspectives, I developed a different set of codes for the deductive coding of the artifacts based on the student goals for the concert.

When the student leaders defined their goals for the concert, they discussed varying elements of awareness, reality, support, and acceptance. Regarding awareness, the students mentioned awareness of personal mental health, emotional awareness and empathy towards others with mental health conditions, and medical or scientific knowledge of mental health conditions. When discussing the reality of mental health, they focused on relational aspects such as how mental health affects a person's interactions with the world around them. The leaders offered several perspectives on support, including the need for both offering and receiving help. Finally, their discussions on acceptance focused on both the positive and the negative, encouraging acceptance of

mental health issues without preconceived notions or assumptions and pointing out the lack of acceptance by society, especially as related to teenagers and social media. Table 9 illustrates the codes, with subcategories, that I created based upon these student goals.

Table 9

Deductive Analysis Codes Based on Student Leader Goals

Goal	Code	Subcategory	Code
Awareness	A	Emotional awareness, what it feels like	AE
		Medical or scientific awareness, knowledge	AM
		Self-awareness	AS
Reality	R	Effects of mental health issues on individual experiencing it	RI
		Effects of mental health issues on others around that individual	RO
		Effects of mental health issues on relationships	RR
Help or support	H	Where to get help	HW
		It's OK if you want help	HO
		Offering help or support to others	HOF
		Admitting that you need help	HA
		Call-to-action – demand that you help or show support	H/CA
Acceptance	AC	Acceptance without assumptions or prejudice	AC
		Societal pressure to conform and be silent, lack of acceptance	AC/SP

After I completed the first round of coding of the artifacts using the student goal codes, I realized how prevalent the student goals were in the material. That strong prevalence suggested a high level of frequency of student goals in the leadership meetings as well, so I completed a second round of coding of my observation notes, applying the student goal codes from Table 6. This additional coding presented a different view of the data, one that illustrated student storytelling.

For my final round of coding, I used an inductive process. I reread all the data (interviews, field notes, observation notes, and artifacts) as one large composite picture, identifying themes, ideas, and quotes within each section that stood out to me as important points of the aggregate narrative told by the data. This analysis method provided space for me to confirm many of my existing coding ideas while also exploring new perspectives. Table 10 portrays the main themes and ideas that emerged from this final coding process.

Table 10

Themes and Main Ideas from Inductive Coding Process

Data Category	Emerging Themes and/or Main Ideas
Artifacts – song lyrics	Strong presence of student goals with heavy emphasis on awareness and reality, mainly 1 st person, strong use of emotion and description – Outliers: “Monday Monday” and “Old Man”
Artifacts – concert readings	Strong presence of student goals, very relational and often personal
Artifacts – concert program	Student vision came across in title and concert flow – student empowerment
Artifacts – concert slides	Student connections to the pieces illustrating meaningfulness and relevance – Outliers: slides giving basic background and history of songs were informative for audience but not necessarily related to the concert purpose
Artifacts – lobby activities	Showed connection to concert topic but not necessarily high participation
Field notes	Mainly demonstrated classroom environment, care, relations (student/student and student/teacher), and teaching style — Outliers: specific dialogic moments such as leadership presentations to Ensemble, work with Ensemble on student arranged music, learning together.
Observation notes (from leadership meetings)	Dialogic nature very evident, student empowerment/student voice very strong, shift in power dynamics and my role, student collaboration, real world learning – Outliers: overwhelming attention to goals by leaders during song selection process, two of the leaders simply weren’t as self-driven and active in the processes overall (Sophie and Rob)

Data Category	Emerging Themes and/or Main Ideas
Interviews – student leaders	Power dynamics and collaboration, student voice and student empowerment, ownership, personal connection and meaning, lessons in leadership, appreciation of other perspectives
Interviews – student participants	Relevance, song choice, ownership, personal connection and meaning, atmosphere of concert, rehearsal process and planning (deep analysis of lyrics), impact, goals of concert – Outliers: strong negative reaction to singing with music (as opposed to having it memorized)
Interviews – parents	Reading component important and helpful, personal connection and impact, connection with child or other students, appropriateness of topic and information presented, factual nature of information presented, relevance of topic, perceived student engagement, hopes regarding impact of concert, appropriateness of songs to themes, atmosphere of concert, lobby activities – Outliers: one parent did not know about lobby activities and therefore did not participate in them, one parent did not relate to some of the songs and did not see the connection between some of the songs and the themes, critique of type of resources available
Interviews – faculty and admin	Importance of concert topic, personal connection and connection to students, perception of student engagement, presence of student voice, educational importance – Outliers: specific mention of music as a safe means of expression and reflection for students, difficulty of dealing with the topic in current society, one person’s potential lack of connection with the music due to it being young-person centric (difference in musical tastes)

The interplay and connectedness between my research questions, the deductive analysis, and the inductive analysis was rich. Examination of the data revealed noteworthy connections between the various data sets, with each research question topic addressed by corresponding data from varying areas of my research analysis. Tables 11 and 12 illustrate the connectedness between my research questions and the various themes and codes. Table 11 connects codes from my deductive analysis with my research questions.

Table 11⁸*Correlation Between Deductive Codes and Research Question Topics*

Main Coding Category or Theme	Research Question Topics			
	Meaningfulness	Relevance	Power Dynamics	Student Goals or Student Voice and Empowerment
Relevance (R)		X		
Finding Meaning/Personal Meaning (PM)	X			X
Communication/Crossing barriers (CCB)			X	X
Environment of Classroom (ECL)			X	X
Environment of Concert (ECO)	X	X		X
Environment of Leadership Committee (ELC)			X	X
Power Dynamics (PD)			X	X
Response (RE)	X	X		X
Engagement (EN)	X	X		X
After Effects (AE)	X	X		X
Critiques	X	X		X
Relations between audience and students (ARS and SRA)	X	X		
Student sense of ownership (O)			X	X
My instruction (MIT and MAT)			X	X
Decision making processes by leadership (D)			X	X

⁸ While outliers were taken into consideration during analysis, they are not included in Table 11.

Notice the widespread presence of the research question topics in many of the data codes. This strong presence is also evident in the inductive analysis themes. Table 12 presents the correlation between major themes from my inductive coding process and my research questions. Once again, while outliers were taken into consideration during final analysis, they are not presented in this table.

Table 12

Correlation Between Inductive Themes and Research Question Topics

Main Coding Category or Theme	Research Question Topics			
	Meaning- fulness	Relevance	Power Dynamics	Student Goals or Student Voice and Empowerment
Artifacts – main theme of student goals				X
Field notes – main themes of environment, relations, and teaching style			X	X
Observation notes – themes of dialogue, student collaboration, power, student goals			X	X
Observation notes – theme of real-world learning		X		
Student leader interviews – themes of power dynamics and collaboration, student voice and student empowerment			X	X
Student leader interviews – themes of ownership, personal connection and meaning	X			X
Student leader interviews – themes regarding lessons in leadership, appreciation of other perspectives		X		

Main Coding Category or Theme	Research Question Topics			
	Meaning- fulness	Relevance	Power Dynamics	Student Goals or Student Voice and Empowerment
Student participant interviews – themes of relevancy, impact		X		
Student participant interviews – theme of song choice	X		X	X
Student participant interviews – themes of ownership, goals of concert			X	X
Student participant interviews -theme of personal connection and meaning, atmosphere of concert, rehearsal process and planning (deep analysis of lyrics), impact	X			
Parent interviews – themes of reading component important and helpful, personal connection and impact, hopes regarding impact of concert, atmosphere of concert, lobby activities	X			
Parent interviews – themes of connection with child or other students, appropriateness, factual nature of information presented, connection to song themes		X		
Parent interviews – theme of perceived student engagement	X			X
Faculty and administrative interviews – themes of importance of concert topic, connection to students, educational importance		X		
Faculty and administrative interviews – themes of personal connection	X			
Faculty and administrative interviews – themes of perception of student engagement, presence of student voice	X			X

Next, I will present the findings from these analysis processes in two large sections. The first section reveals the findings related to meaningfulness and relevance, while the second section presents the findings connected with power dynamics and student goals.

Meaningfulness and Relevance

I discussed the varying definitions of meaningfulness and relevance in chapter 1. For my data analysis, I drew upon ideas in Care, specifically *caring with* (Hendricks, 2021a, 2023, 2025) and *caring for* (Noddings, 2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017), along with music education research by Silverman (2013) and Smith and Lee (2025) to establish parameters for interpreting data as meaningful. As mentioned in chapter 1, I coded data as meaningful if it primarily focused on emotional connection, importance, ownership, and personal engagement. Any data that is meaningful has a component of relevance within it, but drawing upon my research, I evaluated data as relevant if it *primarily* focused on the idea of *caring about* (Noddings, 2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017), individual musicianship (Regelski, 2006, 2012), or non-musical applicability of music study (Iuscă, 2022; Swart, 2020). Data supporting meaningfulness and relevance were found in all data types. I will begin by discussing the potential meaningful and relevant data in the artifacts, then provide first and secondhand accounts of experiential data from field notes, observation notes, and interviews relating to meaningfulness and relevance.

Meaningfulness and Relevance in Concert Event Artifacts

The song lyrics and concert readings contained words and ideas that could strongly encourage audience members and participants to have a meaningful experience or find relevance to the topic being presented. Table 13 illustrates the presence of those

words or ideas within the concert readings and concert songs. While they do not guarantee meaningfulness or relevance, students chose them or created them, in part, because they felt that the words specifically leaned towards bringing about meaningfulness and relevance in the student participants (non-leaders) and audience.

Table 13⁹

Meaningfulness and Relevance in Concert Songs and Concert Readings (in concert order)

Reading or Song	Meaningfulness	Relevance
Shining A Light On Mental Health – reading		X
“Will I” – song	X	x
“Save Me” – song	X	x
A Spotlight on Anxiety – reading		X
“In My Blood” – song		X
“Lifeboat” – song		X
“Monday, Monday” – song	X	x
A Spotlight on Burnout – reading	X	X
“This Is Me Trying” – song	X	X
“Old Man” – song	X	X
“Getting Older” – song		X
A Spotlight on Depression – reading		X
“What Was I Made For” – song	X	x
“Young and Sad” – song	X	x
Bringing Light Into the Darkness – reading	X	X
“Rescue” – song	X	x
A Spotlight on Loneliness – reading	X	X

⁹ As noted previously, to keep tables clearly spaced and easy to read, authorship information for the songs has been omitted. Readers are encouraged to examine the full reference list at the end of the dissertation for full authorship information.

Reading or Song	Meaningfulness	Relevance
“Need You Now” – song		X
“Waving Through A Window” – song	X	X
A Spotlight on Body-Image and Self-Perception – reading		X
“Man in the Mirror” – song		X
“Pretty Isn’t Pretty” – song	X	X
Bringing Others Into the Light – reading	X	X
“Anonymous Ones” – song	X	X
Shattering the Darkness on Self-Harm – reading		X
“How To Save A Life” – song	X	x
Keeping the Light Shining – reading	X	x
“Keep Holding On” – song	X	x
“I’m Still Standing” – song	X	x
“Louder Than Words” – song	X	X
Closing Remarks		X

Note. X denotes a primary objective, whereas x denotes the presence of relevance but as a secondary by-product, not a primary objective. As noted earlier, all meaningfulness data contains elements of relevance, but not all relevance data establishes meaningfulness based on the values of love and connectivity. X in relevance denotes a primary objective of relevance as previously defined.

When student leaders created the concert readings and chose the songs, they placed considerable importance on the words, choosing each word carefully in their writing and examining the lyrics of each song critically. Their discussions and emphasis on text emphasized and, in some cases, forged meaningfulness and relevance into those words, which was further developed during class where leaders and non-leaders discussed lyrics together before rehearsing. This meaning-making increased the meaningfulness and relevance for the students, which the students then attempted to pass on to others through their performance. The presentation of this meaningfulness and

relevance varied, but emotion and use of metaphor were prevalent. Emotion-packed words evoked strong feelings and potentially increased meaningfulness, while metaphors and descriptive phrases brought a sense of reality and acknowledgment of relevance. Some songs and readings contained both emotionally driven language, emphasizing meaningfulness, and descriptive metaphors, demonstrating relevance. Lyrics from the song “Anonymous Ones” (Pasek et al., 2021) evoked emotional sympathy through descriptions of emotional pain but also used metaphors to depict a dark reality encountered all too often by students. A similar duality was present in the lyrics of the song “Pretty Isn’t Pretty” (Rodrigo, 2023). Lyrics described girls’ frustrating attempts to measure up to the unrealistic expectations of society as they buy make-up, change their eating habits, and shop for new clothes, only to find that none of it helps. The lyrics went on to depict the raw and angry emotions experienced by women who continually have to fight to feel that they are pretty.

The student leaders wrote some of their concert readings with similar inclusion of both descriptive relevance and emotional meaningfulness. The reading that began the burnout section used descriptive metaphor to describe the sensation of burnout, evoking feelings of desperation, “it is like a candle or match losing its light because it can no longer burn. Burnout is not giving up, because there’s nothing left to give.” The student’s obvious personal experience with burnout gave the reading meaningfulness and relevance to he and others who had experienced something similar. His words also helped audience members see the relevance of the topic to the school community as whole, realizing that burnout is something that happens within the school and should not be ignored. To offer

further relevance, the student leader also anonymously quoted a fellow student's reflection, "One . . . student noted 'I feel like I try very hard at school and tend to not get the results I want to see'."

Other readings and song lyrics concentrated primarily on either meaningfulness or relevance. Some songs focused on meaningfulness through a heavy and almost continuous reliance on emotion, emphasizing the importance of a certain topic or experience, and thereby hoping to encourage people to care for someone going through it. The song "Save Me" (Jelly Roll, 2020/2023) was one such song, with lyrics that primarily evoked feelings or relatable emotions. In particular, many of the lyrics potentially evoked sympathy by emphasizing the devastation that someone can feel when they are mentally and emotionally overwhelmed. The student leader who wrote the reading for the final section of the concert ("Keeping the Light Shining") also used emotional intensity to encourage meaningfulness, but instead of evoking sympathy, he tried to encourage hope. He used personalization and connectiveness to incite an emotional response, "No matter what struggles you or your loved ones face, there is always hope . . . and . . . your actions and example have a profound effect on those around you."

Songs that focused primarily on relevance relied heavily on describing relatable events or people, such as in the song "Lifeboat" (O'Keefe & Murphy, 2014). The lyrics in the song combined metaphors with depictions of typical teenager experiences to portray the relevance of anxiety. Other times, knowledge of relevance was promoted by presenting undeniable facts and combining them with personal accounts. This approach

was used by the student leader who wrote the body-image and self-perception reading. The leader included student quotes, “I want to change my obsession with others’ opinions and begin to not care what people think about me,” and research-supported facts about eating disorders, “95% of those who display issues with eating are between the ages 13–15 . . . 8 million or more people in the United States have an eating disorder,” to emphasize the presence of body-image issues in the everyday life of those around her.

Meaningfulness and Relevance in Field Notes, Observation Notes, and Interviews

As noted previously in Chapter 1, defining meaningfulness and relevance is complex. Interpreting evidence of meaningfulness and relevance within data is even more complicated. Table 13 (pp. 162–163) indicates the presence of potentially meaningful and relevant content in the culminating concert event through artifacts, but it does not disclose any evidence of whether or not that meaningfulness and relevance was felt by those involved, nor does it relate evidence concerning the meaningfulness and relevance of the teaching and planning processes utilized in this dialogic teaching project. The evidence for both of those was found in other forms of data.

Striving to avoid oversimplification of such nuanced concepts, I offer brief explanations of the types of meaningfulness and relevance found in data before presenting the data in tables. Interviews with audience members provided evidence of perceived feelings of meaningfulness and relevance from the concert event. For students (both leaders and participants), however, data regarding meaningfulness and relevance was found through a variety of data. Field notes of classroom instruction, observation notes from leadership meetings, and interviews worked together to provide evidence of

perceived meaningfulness and relevance throughout the project, including the processes involved such as teaching and planning, and the culminating concert event. Tables 14 and 15 illustrate the presence of perceived meaningfulness and relevance for audience members, student participants, and student leaders in these other forms of data. To provide more detail, the specific types of meaningfulness and relevance are indicated.

Table 14

Meaningfulness in Field Notes, Observation Notes, and Interviews

Data	Showing importance	Sense of ownership, investment	Emotional connection, personal engagement
FN 11/13/23			X
FN 2/8/24		X	X
FN 3/14/24			X
ONL 11/15/23	X		
ONL email 3/8/24		X	
FN – presentation	X	X	X
I – 32524	O		X
I – 32724	O		X
I – 32824-1		O	X
I – 32824-2	O, X		O, X
I – 32824-3		X	X
I – 4124		X	X
I – 4224	X	O	X
I – 4324	X		O, X
I – 4424			O, X, negative X
I – 4524	X, O, negative O	X	X
I – 4624	X	O, X	O, X
I – 4824		X	X, barriers to X

Note: FN = Field Notes, ONL=Observation Notes from Leadership Meetings, I=Interview, X=felt personally, O=observed

Table 15*Relevance in Field Notes, Leadership Meeting Notes, and Interviews*

Data	Relatedness to Surroundings				Future Benefits	
	Personal	Family	Friends	School	Educational	Career
FN 2/8/24	X	X	X	X		
ONL 10/24/23				X		
ONL 11/15/23				X		
ONL 12/13/23	X	X	X	X		
ONL 1/4/24	X	X	X	X		
ONL 1/18/24	X	X	X	X		
ONL 1/18/24 email					X	X
ONL 1/25/24 email						X
ONL 1/25/24					X	X
ONL 2/8/24		X	X	X		
ONL 2/15/24					X	
ONL 3/8/24		X	X			
FN – How Are You	XPN	X		X		
I – 32524	X	X		XPN		
I – 32724	X			X		
I – 32824-1	X			X		
I – 32824-2	X			X		
I – 32824-3	X		X		X	X
I – 4124	X			X	X	X
I – 4224	X	X		X		
I – 4324	X		X	X		
I – 4424	XPN	X		X		
I – 4524	X			X		
I – 4624	X	X		X		
I – 4824	X	X		X		
TI – Spanish				X		
TI – Science				X		
TI – English				X		
TI – counselor				X		

Note. FN = Field Notes, ONL=Observation Notes from Leadership Meetings, I=Interview,

TI=teacher interview (conducted by student leader)

XPN denotes both positive and negative response

Meaningfulness and Relevance in Field Notes and Observation Notes. As illustrated in Table 14 (p. 167), most evidence of meaningfulness came through during the interviews, but there were field notes and observation notes that also related meaningful experiences for the students involved. As mentioned earlier, the student leaders took special care in choosing songs whose lyrics depicted certain emotions and messages, thereby inferring that meaningfulness was demonstrated during the song selection process, but that meaningfulness was achieved primarily through focus on student goals, which will be discussed later in this chapter. There were, however, other moments of meaningfulness in the planning and rehearsing process.

I captured meaningful moments that occurred during class in the field notes. These meaningful moments reflected students' sensitivity and importance regarding the message of the concert. On November 13, 2023, I presented a reflective writing assignment to the Ensemble members asking them to discuss their thoughts on human dignity and the treatment of individuals with mental health issues. Many of their answers reflected thoughtfulness and depth. Chad, a senior Ensemble member who was not a student leader, wrote "Respecting their [people with mental health issues] human dignity looks like empathizing with their situation and loving them for who they are." A junior Ensemble member, Mary, wrote "this is something that is very critical to me in today's society" and "just because someone might have something difficult they have to deal with doesn't change who they are as a person, this is something that shouldn't need to be a secret." During rehearsal on February 8, 2024, concert preparation prompted a meaningful group discussion during Ensemble class. As part of the meaning-making

process, Ensemble leaders presented background and contextual information about each piece during class, encouraging class discussions. On that particular day, two of the pieces that focused on help or support were being rehearsed and discussed: “Rescue” (Daigle, 2020) and “Keep Holding On” (Lavigne & Gottwald, 2009). I asked the students to define the difference in the type of action described or called for in each of the pieces. The student discussion that followed showed deliberate consideration of the songs involved. Several of the boys pointed out that the song “Rescue” (Daigle, 2020) was about “pulling someone to safety” whereas “Keep Holding On” (Lavigne & Gottwald, 2009) was more about “encouragement” and “empowerment.” The discussion continued, with students noting the importance of both types of support, resulting in a connective and meaningful classroom experience.

Observation notes from leadership meetings revealed meaningfulness primarily through student emphasis on specific aspects of mental health topics, with students expressing meaningfulness by indicating importance. Amelia and Steve demonstrated this when discussing the best way to approach self-harm in the concert. The observation notes from the November 15, 2023 leadership meeting describe Amelia and Steve’s discussion in which they expressed their own personal meaningfulness related to this specific topic through emphasis. Steve mentioned that “stats are important” but for “something as serious as self-harm” the focus should be on support, not awareness or statistical data. Amelia stressed the “importance of having resources so students know who to contact.” The importance they placed on this specific topic and their concern for its impact on others determined how they approached it in the concert.

As illustrated in Table 15 above (p. 168), evidence of relevance occurred once in field notes and numerous times in observation notes from leadership meetings. The leaders' recurring concern for relevance was also evident in the student goals (discussed later in this chapter). Along with relevance being a key factor in song selection, the student leaders regularly identified relevance as a major component in the concert planning process. On October 24, 2023, Amelia suggested that the leaders interview their AP Psychology teacher for perspectives on "mental health issues that a lot of teens face." This idea of interviewing teachers later grew, with the leaders interviewing several of their teachers to identify common mental health concerns at the school. They also wanted to handout a survey to students. On November 15, 2023, the student leaders proposed giving an anonymous survey to the entire student body so they could share statistical data at the concert about common mental health concerns at their school. That particular activity never came to fruition due to lack of administrative approval, but the leaders' focus on relevance continued as they strove to choose songs and create readings that would connect with their peers. As the planning continued, the student leaders expanded their views of relevance to include not just other students but adults as well. During the meeting on January 25, 2024, Steve argued, "I feel like we have the teenager perspective, but I want to be sure we relate to everybody."

During rehearsals, the leaders worked to share that relevance with the other Ensemble members. In the field notes from February 8, 2024, I mentioned the effects on the Ensemble members of the student leaders' presentations for each song during class. Although brief, the presentations were quite helpful in encouraging and building

relevance, in part because they reflected student views and perspectives. The leaders presented information on the various pieces that they deemed important, significant, or applicable, sharing a sense of relevance and relatedness with their fellow students. This encouraged more focus on the lyrics and meaning behind each song as other Ensemble members expanded these discussions, focusing on their connections with the lyrics to help determine musical interpretation and expression. Data from the interviews, presented later in this chapter, supports the importance of these discussions and deep analysis of lyrics and context.

In addition to the relevance of the concert topic to people's lives, another type of relevance also existed for the student leaders, the educational and life experience relevance obtained through leading such a substantial project. Although not the primary focus of the project, these areas of relevance were still important, as supported by their inclusion in the student leaders' interview answers. As leaders, these students gained new experience in communication platforms and styles, organizational techniques, and due dates.

The difference in communication styles and responsibilities was the most regularly occurring non-music lesson the student leaders experienced. These communications were often formal and frequently included varying organizational tasks and timelines that the leaders were tasked with completing on their own. The most common example of this was through the student-teacher communications the leaders experienced with me outside of meetings, which was often conducted through business-like emails. These emails were different from the educational emails, chats, and other

online educational forms of communication the leaders usually encountered, containing blunt instructions and brief compliments, with little other explanation. An example of this was the email I sent them on January 25, 2024, which contained the following, “Excellent work today. Please keep the spreadsheet updated as you contact teachers [regarding interviews].” Regarding the potential student survey, the email reported that the administration was “open to this depending on how it is handled. Please start a doc with potential survey questions and share it with me.” These were both references to discussions from the meeting and included tasks to be completed by them, on their own time.

To fulfill those duties, the students relied on their education and each other. Izzy assumed most of the organizational aspects of the leadership group. Regarding the above-mentioned teacher interviews, Izzy created a template to assist the other leaders in their correspondence for the teacher interviews. I have included her template here to emphasize the professionalism and seriousness with which she addressed the issue:

Good morning,

As students have continued planning the March social justice concert, we have been interested in discussing your thoughts and observations on mental health throughout high school. We would also love to hear any ideas you may have on how mental health assignments/extra credit could potentially be incorporated into the classroom. Please let me know when a good time to meet would be. We are hoping to move through meeting fairly quickly so the sooner the better is most definitely appreciated! Have a good day.

Thanks,

NAME

Izzy also became adept at sending professional emails through her correspondence with the community service organization. Ultimately, handling much of the professional communication with people and organizations beyond the confines of the school became her area of specialty within the group.

I also observed the difficulties experienced by the leaders in meeting deadlines. Despite their usually responsible behavior and actions in school, I witnessed numerous leaders struggle to adapt their knowledge and experience regarding deadlines to this project, something mentioned by both of the student leaders who were interviewed. Of all the non-musical relevance they experienced, this seemed to surprise them the most. They had not fully grasped the flexibility their school setting normally allowed, with the potential to turn in late work for partial credit. In a project such as this, there was very little cushion regarding timing; if students did not get something done by the established deadline, it was left out of the concert (no late submissions). The students were also used to receiving feedback and communications from their teachers quickly. The professional world does not always function in that manner. Unlike our school setting, professionals at service organizations were not required to respond within 24 hours, so the leaders also had to learn to do follow-ups with the various adults they contacted, a task none of them expected. These experiences served as relevant life lessons that will potentially be important in their future.

Meaningfulness and Relevance in Interviews. While the field notes and observation notes provided supporting evidence of meaningfulness and relevance, the bulk of the data for the primary research question came from the interviews. As noted in Chapter 3, I conducted twelve semi-structured open-ended interviews for this project, the demographics of which were listed in Table 2 (pp. 112–113). The interviews included two student leaders, two Ensemble student participants (Ensemble members who were not leaders), and eight audience members. More details regarding the individual interviewees will be presented within each subsection.

The student interviews included primarily males, with one female. The audience member interviews were primarily female and included parents of Ensemble member leaders, parents of general chorus student participants, faculty members, and one administrator. Within that pool, there was one husband and wife who both volunteered to be interviewed (Alice and Matthew). I conducted all interviews individually and privately (including the husband and wife, who agreed to be interviewed separately). A copy of the interview questions can be found in Appendix B. Since the interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, non-scripted follow-up questions and conversations also took place to varying degrees during the interviews. Tables 14 and 15, presented earlier in this chapter, reveal expressions of meaningfulness and relevance data in every interview, but the presentations of that data were varied. Understanding that data is best accomplished by grouping the interviews according to concert roles (student leaders, student participants, and audience members).

Student leader interviews. The two student leaders who volunteered to be interviewed, Amelia and Steve, were both senior Ensemble members with multiple years of membership in the group. Steve, a high-achieving student and devout Catholic, considered his religious faith to be a key component of his identity. He was funny, frequently expressed his love for sci-fi and country music, and participated in musical theater. He was not particularly social in large groups, but had some close friends in the school, some of whom were in Ensemble. He identified as a heterosexual male and led a relatively conservative lifestyle for high school (no drinking, few parties) but was accepting of others who lived their lives differently. Choosing mental health as the concert topic was originally Steve's idea. By contrast, Amelia, was a liberal atheist who was outgoing and openly identified as bisexual. Also a high-achieving student, Amelia was very outspoken and unafraid of sharing her opinions in class, but she was not combative in her expressions. She, like Steve, participated in musical theater, but was not as passionate about it. Hoping to pursue a career in psychology, Amelia was a highly organized individual who worked to create an equilibrium between her academic pursuits and more active social life. She was impassioned about mental health and empathetic to many individuals dealing with mental health issues.

Steve and Amelia spoke of the meaningfulness and relevance of the songs during their interviews. Amelia felt that the meaningfulness increased due to the deep study of the lyrics, "it helped being able to deep dive into the lyrics, just helped you understand like what we were trying to say and what each thing meant to other people." Steve directly connected with some of the songs due to his own personal experiences, "so like

‘Waving Through a Window’ (Pasek and Paul, 2017b), that song pretty much encapsulates the more bad parts of my high school experience.” Speaking of the relevance of that same song, Steve stated, “this song is my struggles with anxiety and loneliness” and he felt that audience members who had struggled with similar issues could learn more about “themselves.”

The data also revealed, however, that the leaders’ connections to the songs were not just based on their own personal experiences, as the experiences of others also strengthened those connections. Steve argued that all the Ensemble students working together to create the PowerPoint slides about the songs increased the meaningfulness of the music to him, “the [songs] that didn’t connect with me very much, did after reading and hearing how other people connect.” Steve felt that everyone in the audience could find some song that was meaningful or relevant to them, “I think that everyone had at least one song that they connected with, like everyone in that theater, on stage and in the audience.” Amelia specifically mentioned the relevance of the songs she did not personally pick, “that was someone else’s voice so they were able to be heard.”

Steve and Amelia also spoke of the meaningfulness and relevance of the experience as a whole, each expressing a type of pride or ownership in the concert event that was personally meaningful and noting the relevance both emotionally and educationally of the leadership and planning processes. Regarding the personal meaningfulness of the concert event overall, Steve stated, “it was impactful,” and when comparing this concert to past concerts, Amelia argued, “it was definitely more moving for me.” As a leader, Steve mentioned feeling “very proud of everybody at the end,

especially when you called up the leaders at the end, it was like, we did this.” Amelia also spoke warmly about her role as a leader, “I liked being a part of it because it felt like I . . . was doing more than just being in the performance of it all . . . and creating the focus of the concert was really cool.” Of the educational benefit, Steve admitted, “I’m glad I got to have that experience.” Amelia’s confidence as a leader increased as a result of her leadership experience for this concert, “I liked being in a leadership position . . . I’ve been in leadership positions before but never to where we had as much power . . . it was really nice being able to know that like I’d be comfortable in a role like that.”

Both Steve and Amelia also articulated the practical relevance they had gained. Amelia noted that the “whole process, it really taught me deadlines!” Steve also commented on deadlines, noting that it “had never really occurred to any of us” that if they were late planning something for the concert “it’s not going to happen.” Steve also described the practical aspect of presenting and planning an event for the general public as opposed to students in a classroom, “planning for some big event, I had never really done that for like a real thing before . . . something that would be presented to real people.” Steve commented on important leadership lessons he learned during the process, like letting people “shine in different ways” and “to trust the process.” Amelia also spoke of the educational relevance of the concert topic to her personally, “I’m interested in psychology and that’s what I’m going to go into, so I liked being a part of this one specifically.” Although the musical and activist-minded goals were the primary focus, both Amelia and Steve also appreciated these more practical leadership lessons gained from the experience.

Student participant interviews. The two student participants interviewed were both Ensemble members who participated in the concert and all classroom activities but had not chosen to be student leaders. Both seniors, Harry and James were first-year Ensemble members who had participated in general chorus in previous years, before auditioning for Ensemble and being accepted as a member of the select group. Harry was a quiet young man, studious, and a deep thinker. For him, music was a much-needed outlet. James was outgoing and athletic. Always striving to do well in school, James tended to put a lot of pressure on himself to be perfect. For him, music was a fun hobby.

Similar to the student leaders, they also found personal meaningfulness and relevance in the music of the concert. Harry found the overall song selection for the concert “impactful,” and stated, “the song choice was very good.” James cited the lyrics as being meaningful:

If anything it was the lyrics of the songs we were singing, kind of helped me . . . it was more like hearing those lyrics and knowing what I felt, especially as an underclassman, what I’ve been through, um, it almost made me feel better about it.

Harry and James both felt that the intense focus on the lyrics increased that meaningfulness. James mentioned “whenever you kind of like are told to . . . look at [the song lyrics] and reflect on it helps . . . kind of think deeper about it.” Harry, who had found the use of printed music distracting in the concert (the music is usually performed by memory at our concerts but due to time constraints this time the Ensemble students used music folders), felt that the deep analysis of the lyrics was helpful in retaining focus

on the meaning of the music. He stated that even though he found using music distracting, he “still had that [deep understanding of lyrics] in his head.”

Both Harry and James cited specific songs in the concert as personally meaningful. Although he mentioned not connecting much with “Old Man” (Bryan, 2020) or “Getting Older” (Eilish, 2021), James found personal meaning in the song “Save Me” (Jelly Roll, 2020/2023), attributing a religious slant to the song, “that’s how I saw it, even though it’s not meant to be that way.” He also found the lyrics in “Anonymous Ones” (Pasek et al., 2021) meaningful, “It’s like don’t mess up or they’ll know you’re weak. Like I have to be perfect all the time and . . . it’s like putting unnecessary pressure on yourself because nobody can know that you’re human.” Harry found a personal connection with “Man in the Mirror” (Ballard & Garrett, 2011) because he felt the lyrics were “about looking in the mirror and it’s not really who he wants to be, and, I don’t know, that had a really big impact on me.” In addition, he felt the song “Old Man” (Bryan, 2020) provided a meaningful connection between he and his father. Harry “always put myself in my dad’s shoes when we sang it” and he remembers “giving [his father] a big hug after . . . definitely created a bond.” Although Harry and James did not discuss relevance much, they both agreed that “Anonymous Ones” (Pasek et al., 2021) was relevant to the school. As James stated, “I think we all kind of understood and related to that song.” Although they were different individuals from dissimilar backgrounds, both Harry and James felt the pressures of the high achieving environment of the school community, pressures they felt were shared by their classmates and expressed, in part, through that song.

Audience Interviews. Audience members perceived meaningfulness and relevance differently than the students. They indicated two different types: meaningfulness and relevance that related to them personally, and meaningfulness and relevance that related to their child or the students at the school which they either experienced personally or observed. Most relayed both during their interview, some in regard to the concert overall and some related to specific activities or songs. Not all songs appealed to all concert members, and some audience members also offered critiques.

Some audience members expressed connection with the concert as a whole. Jean, a child psychologist and parent of a general chorus student, felt the concert helped her discover new meaning and perspectives, “it kind of almost forced me to think outside the box and how what those other words in the song could be interpreted to mean.” Due to her professional career, she also found the concert “super relevant” personally. Sally, a long-time faculty member at the school, also found the concert personally relevant, declaring “I think mental health issues have touched all of us.” Father John, priest and headmaster of the school, spoke of the meaningfulness of mental health as a topic, both in this concert and in the arts in general:

the heavy stuff . . . it speaks to deeper questions about our existence, about happiness, about purpose, all of those things that I find make life . . . fuller, even if they’re bad, that we all have to struggle with sometimes.

Jenny, a higher education teacher and parent of one of the general chorus students, also expressed feeling the depth of the concert overall, “I felt a lot of emotion, I felt like, with the focus on the lyrics, they became more real to me.” Jenny was complimentary of the

student readings and their open acknowledgment of mental health as an issue that affects everyone, including multiple generations, “I think the students did a good job of showing there’s not one particular stereotype or typecast this issue affects. This issue affects all of us in different ways, in different seasons of life.” On the other hand, Matthew, a theology teacher at the school and parent of one of the student leaders, experienced mixed feelings of meaningfulness with the overall concert. He “definitely” connected with the concert material and the performers but “since more of the music was more contemporary” he was “less familiar with it” and “a little less connected.”

Some audience members found personal meaning in specific pieces. Kathy, a parent of a general chorus student, connected deeply with some of the music. Regarding the song “Pretty Isn’t Pretty” (Rodrigo, 2023), she teared up as she revealed during her interview, “people look at you and they think oh because you’re short or petite or whatever, everybody likes you cause you’re pretty, but that doesn’t mean that you feel pretty.” She also expressed a personal faith connection with the song “Rescue” (Daigle, 2020). Father John also found certain songs very meaningful, including “How To Save a Life” (Fray, 2006) and “Waving Through a Window” (Pasek & Paul, 2017b), stating, “just for me personally, there was some music in here that was very powerful.” For Jenny, the intense meaningfulness of some of the songs occurred for a variety of reasons. She mentioned that personally, the song “Lifeboat” (O’Keefe & Murphy, 2014) was “one that really hit me.” For her in-laws though, the song “Monday, Monday” (Phillips, 1966/2008) provided more generational connection. The song her family talked about the most was “Rescue” (Daigle, 2020). The song’s meaningfulness was a combination of the

connection with the song's lyrics and the song's purpose in the concert:

We thought ["Rescue"] was beautifully done. It was done in the middle of the concert ... and just that part about "bringing light into the darkness" [program title of that section] with that song. I think . . . you're starting to reach a crescendo, you know like the top part of the concert. You know, going in from there, . . . bringing the light into the darkness and then talking about loneliness, image, self-perception.

Jenny also mentioned that the meaningfulness of the concert for she and her family continued after the event was over, "for me and my husband, we kept the conversation after the concert going in the car, before we went to bed, and even later on in the week."

Alice, the parent of a student leader and wife of faculty member Matthew, found both meaningfulness and relevance in the concert. She shared, "for me [the concert] instilled hope." She elaborated on this meaningfulness:

Knowing that so many had shared, you know, personally, it was just, it was eye opening to me and . . . instilled hope that we're getting to a better place with being able to talk openly about all of the things [mental health issues] and get people the help that they need.

Alice also expressed relevance regarding some of the individual concert topics, especially anxiety. Her own personal struggles in the past increased her sense of community during the concert. She reflected:

We all struggle with ways of maintaining our mental health, and so I think recognizing our own personal struggles and . . . connecting with others who have

similar struggles or even greater ones . . . was a connection point for me.

Alice was also one of the few audience members who commented on the lobby activities, “I think that piece was helpful in engaging some of the themes and starting the kind of reflective, you know, mindset from the very beginning of walking in the door” and she felt that answering those questions in the interactive exhibits “in an artistic way . . . was also just fun.” Additionally, Alice found the concert experience particularly meaningful as a mom because her son had been one of the leaders. She commented:

Knowing that he was able to really think about challenges related to mental health in such a comprehensive way and engage others in planning something so powerful . . . that’s why the experience was different for me this time I think.

She also noted being, “exceedingly proud of him [for] his sensitivity to the challenges people face.”

By contrast, Anna, ex-military and mother of a general chorus student, was surprised by the meaningfulness she found in some music, but did not connect with several others, a point of contention between her and her daughter. The depth in the song “What Was I Made For” (O’Connell & O’Connell, 2023) surprised her, and although she had heard “This Is Me Trying” (Swift, 2020b) multiple times in the car as she drove her daughter to school, she had never really paid attention to it. She admitted that after the concert she had begun to listen to the Taylor Swift song more closely and feels “it’s a really good lyric.” She did not find the songs “Rescue” (Daigle, 2020) and “Pretty Isn’t Pretty” (Rodrigo, 2023) meaningful, and the lack of personal meaningfulness for “Pretty Isn’t Pretty” (Rodrigo, 2023) really upset her daughter, “my daughter was so upset ‘cause

I guess that's one that she really liked and I didn't." Anna also felt inconsistent relevance for the songs at the concert, "so some of the songs were very easy to . . . make the connection with the music and the lyrics, and others, I had to sit there and go I didn't get that one."

During the interviews, some audience members brought up their observations of the students during the concert. These audience members perceived engagement, passion, and emotion from students that they felt inferred student meaningfulness, which impacted their own meaningfulness as an audience member and parent. In relation to her child and the other students at the school, Jean felt she saw increased meaningfulness through her child's facial expressions, increased engagement on stage, and focus. She and her husband noted that their child was "into" a specific song. She noted similar increased intentionality and engagement regarding the students doing the readings, "you could tell, no I'm not singing but I'm still super impassioned by this and I'm gonna give these four words more oomph and eye contact." She summed it up by stating "their passion shown bright."

Jenny noted the passion of the singers as well, mentioning in her interview, "[during] some of the songs, some of your singers were crying, which makes me cry too, cause they feel it." Anna noted increased engagement in the students, remarking that in parts of the concert "it seemed impactful even for the kids that weren't performing." Matthew felt that "there did seem to be a notch higher level of buy-in and engagement" from the students as a whole but also commented on the meaningfulness for his own child specifically. He noted the emotion of his own child and felt that his son had a sense

of “pride” in having helped produce the concert. Kathy perceived increased meaningfulness in her own child as well, a young man who sang as part of the general chorus and had talked about several of the songs at home, an unusual event because “he’s normally so quiet.”

Along with discussing meaningfulness, several audience members noted the relevance of the concert. Many parents interviewed pointed out the prevalence of mental health issues in the lives of today’s teenagers. Anna felt that mental health topics were very relevant to teens and that along with focusing on academic excellence, education should also include mental health, “we need to be teaching about . . . self-esteem, body appreciation and understanding, and just mental health for that age level,” something not frequently done in many of the educational institutions in the area. Jean also mentioned how important it was to present mental health in an accessible way to these teenagers, citing the concert as a positive example, “these kids are not going to . . . like reading about stats, but they’re thinking about it when they listen to these songs, so being able to tie those to actual facts . . . is really great.” When asked about the topics of the concert overall, she declared, “they seemed to really highlight real issues that are happening in their teenage lives.” In Jean’s professional opinion, the body-image section was particularly relevant, “I don’t know of a teenager . . . that has not engaged in some sort of weird, disordered eating behavior.” Kathy acknowledged the relevance of the song “Young and Sad” (Cyrus, 2020), feeling sorrow that the song was so relevant to some of the students, “all [the students] have a secret home life, good, bad, or otherwise, it’s just the perception on the outside is not what’s in their little hearts.” Alice also expressed

sentiments affirming the relevance of the concert topic to the students, “our kids today are really just dealing with a lot at such a young age.” She went on to express hope that audience members would recognize the importance and relevance of the topic, and use the concert as a way of beginning difficult conversations:

I was imagining during the concert that there might be families . . . who maybe aren’t as open to [discussing mental health] . . . that are maybe wondering . . . maybe I should have a dialogue with my kids around the themes of this concert and just make sure they’re ok.

Jenny also noted the parental relevance of the concert, “reminding me as a parent, what are things I can do with my child to be open and honest about this.”

The educators interviewed expressed different perspectives regarding relevance. Sally hoped the concert would help her connect with her math students, “how can this make me a better teacher if I can learn about what . . . issues they have.” Father John spoke of relevance to the students, but from a more reflective perspective:

[The music the students chose for the concert] makes me wonder . . . how many of our young people struggle with some of these thoughts, these issues? How many of them have personal experience of it? How many of them remain hidden? And they carry the stuff inside themselves and they don’t have avenues, or this may be the first avenue that they’ve experienced of being able to speak about it in any way . . . so that piece kind of worries me, scares me even. Do they reflect on this regularly? Do they carry some of this a lot? You know, loneliness, dark thoughts, I don’t know.

Father John went on to express hope that the music might help the students at the school, “they can identify with a phrase or the lyrics, or something in the music itself . . . can help them.” Matthew expressed the importance of a different type of educational relevance, “as an educator and parent, I think it’s very important for [the students] to not just be told that their perspectives matter, but to be given an opportunity for their perspectives to actually matter,” an opportunity that was presented through this concert planning and performance event.

The meaningfulness and relevance of the interactive lobby exhibits was inconsistent amongst audience members, and some interviewees shared some criticisms. Jean appreciated the resources we had available, but felt there should have been more, including some private practitioners because there are demographics within our school community that “might do more Ph.D. level psychology versus . . . clinicians.” She also suggested having QR codes for people to scan to download mental health apps like “mindfulness” and “headspace.” Anna did not participate in any of the lobby activities because she did not know about them. She did not express any strong feelings regarding her lack of participation, but she did appear interested in finding out more about them during our interview.

A few audience members brought up the school’s ability to produce a concert like this in the current political climate. Jean mentioned “some of the things our leaders are doing at the public level in education . . . we will be the wokest school cause we’re private and we can do what we want.” Father John also mentioned the importance and complexity of producing concerts like this, concerts that deal with “social issues.” He felt

the concerts were a welcome addition to the school curriculum because, “our curriculum at [this school] should be about our personal life, personal development, intellectual, physical, but also looking at the world in which we live critically.” However, he noted that in our current society, “we hear the words ideological, we hear polarized” and some parents object to having an agenda or “are more dismissive because it’s not a traditional concert.” However, ultimately, he felt that “our program in music, and I think this is extremely valuable, move[s] beyond boundaries, beyond curricular limits, to real life.” That connection to everyday lives and experiences proved to be the heart of the relevance of this concert event.

Power Dynamics and Student Goals

The two secondary research questions focused specifically on the students and their response to the more dialogue-focused teaching. The first of the secondary research questions examined the shift in power dynamics during the planning processes of the choral project. I present the findings on those power dynamics through field notes about the classroom environment and observation notes from the leadership meetings, with additional supporting evidence of shared power indicated in interview responses. That power dynamic shift was closely related to the student leaders’ opportunities to set and implement their own goals for the concert event, potentially increasing student voice and empowerment. The final research question examined the presence of those student goals in both the planning processes and the concert event, and the story the students told through those goals, so I present the student goal data next. I recount the goals for the concert event established by the student leaders, which demonstrated student voice and

laid the foundation for the collective narrative they told, then offer evidence of those goals in numerous data, including leadership meetings, concert event activities, and artifacts.

Power Dynamics

Dialogue in the classroom requires a shift in power; Freire (1970) noted that those silenced cannot critically examine the world or free themselves from oppression. Applying that idea to my classroom, I recognized that students whose voices are not recognized cannot engage in dialogue. Therefore, I chose to relinquish much of the planning, meaning-making, and interpretative powers, enabling the students to rise and engage in a dialogic process of their own choosing, in which I was also able to participate within the boundaries they had established. This process began by building trust, similar to that described by Hendricks (2018), and attempting to implement *caring with* (Hendricks, 2021a, 2023, 2025). As trust and openness grew, students began to more comfortably express their opinions and views, which provided the space needed for them to identify the issue they wanted to address with this concert: mental health. Akin to Freire's (1970) ideas regarding the dialogic process, the students generated several questions regarding mental health, to which I added my own queries. I initially expected the students to probe outward, examining the difficulties experienced by a target population experiencing mental health issues, but I quickly realized that for them the problem was much more personal. They were concerned about the mental health experiences of themselves and their peers. In an environment filled with high grade point averages, college applications, athletic practices, student council meetings, and service

groups, they recognized that their actions were valued but their inner worries and troubles were often silenced. They wanted to use this concert to be heard and recognized.

For many students, open and honest dialogue about mental health concerns can feel risky. Concerns over potential judgement from peers, especially those who might be social or academic leaders, can be intimidating. I also know from my own experience that admitting weakness as a high achiever in school can be terrifying. Providing the scaffolding to engage in dialogue in a healthy and empowering manner was essential for this project's success, so I deliberately broke away from traditional choral hierarchy.

The repertoire selection, interpretation, concert flow, and concert focus were no longer director driven. Instead, students held discussions regarding the meaning of lyrics, their personal significance, and the resulting musical interpretation, which we then implemented as a group in the following rehearsal. Division of duties within the classroom revolved around choice and discussion rather than assignment and requirement. The students set the goals, and I worked alongside them to achieve those goals. The students acknowledged and respected my expertise in the field of music, but I was a partner with my students, showing respect for their experiences and ideas as well. Evidence of this dialogic process and resulting partnership during the planning processes can be found in both the field notes and the observation notes. Those interviewed also mentioned the shift in power, evident to the adults that attended the concert event and remembered throughout the process by the students.

Power Dynamics Data in Field Notes and Observation Notes. The dialogic aspect of this project began with the introduction of the project to Ensemble on

September 18, 2023. I described the project to Ensemble as both student-led and student-planned. Rather than director-chosen leaders, I invited the students to volunteer to be leaders, but only after having several weeks to think and reflect on their own. This purposeful allotment of time for reflection before assuming the mantle of leadership was the topic of the field notes on October 9, 2023:

Providing students with time to reflect and think after the initial introduction of a big idea is, I feel, an important part of dialogic teaching. If an idea or concept is new to a student, they may need time to digest it before being comfortable entering into dialogue about it... This way, their level of involvement is more likely to be based on thought and purposeful decision making than in-the-moment reactions. I also feel it is fairer; I have had time to think on this information and they should receive the same courtesy. It is a show of respect from me.

Four students initially volunteered to be leaders. When a fifth leader wanted to join later in the process, he spoke with both me and the existing leaders, who then invited him to join them, resulting in a more fluid and collaborative process than simply having a fifth leader forced into the leadership team.

Shared Power and Dialogue Through Arranging Music. Shared power was evident in the classroom early in the school year and throughout the project through Steve's music arrangements. Steve had mentioned from the project's conception that he wanted to arrange some of the music for it. He had taken music theory the previous year and passed the AP exam, and he was currently enrolled in my year-long independent study music arranging course. The field notes from October 6, 2023 reveal some of his

gradual progression towards independence in arranging:

The arranging instruction started out very teacher-as-leader intensive, with me giving him very specific assignments with right and wrong answers and specific objectives that could be evaluated – I needed to teach him certain skills. At this point though, it has begun evolving, . . . I still have . . . expectations . . . but there is a lot more flexibility.

This flexibility continued to build and evolve. The Ensemble performed his arrangement of a favorite childhood Christmas song at the annual Christmas concert, even contributing lyrics to create additional personalized verses to the song. It was a positive learning experience for Steve, one that enabled him to begin his arrangements for the March concert with a much better practical idea of what would and would not work for this group.

For the March concert, Steve chose the songs he wanted to arrange, beginning the process late in the fall semester and working diligently throughout the winter to get them ready for the students. He picked three songs that he connected with personally, “Louder Than Words” (Larson, 1990/2021), “Save Me” (Jelly Roll, 2020/2023), and “Will I” (Larson, 1996). For all three of the songs, he chose the voicing, solo parts, and texture. In many cases he also chose who sang the solo parts, since he had written them with specific voices in mind. My field note reflections discuss Steve’s individual contribution, noting that “the whole arranging process” should be “his own contribution to an ongoing dialogue about the music and the topic.” When Ensemble began learning each of his arrangements in class, he would explain some of his musical decisions to the other

Ensemble students, justifying various decisions or elaborating on his vision for the song. As the students became more comfortable with this, they also began to ask a few questions, not just of him but of me as well whenever they would work on one of my arrangements. These questions enabled them to dig deeper into the music and encouraged more critical reflection about musical decisions. In some cases, adjustments were made to arrangements, shifting the voicing, dynamics, or articulation to better match the group's perception and choice of meaning. Such questioning, discussions, and shifts in musical interpretation determined by the students were new experiences for the students and for me, as they served as unanticipated forms of dialogue that kept the meaning-making process fluid and active.

Shared Power and Dialogue Within the Leadership Group. The dialogic nature of the leadership group was evident in their collaborative work with each other throughout the planning processes. Engaging in dialogue and joint decision-making, every aspect of their interaction leaned towards shared power dynamics. My observation notes reveal numerous aspects of this at the very first leadership meeting on October 24, 2023. When they entered the classroom they all sat in a circle rather than in a line or more formal arrangement. During discussions, “they looked at each other when speaking or responding, making eye contact but also looking down at their screens [on their Chromebooks] to type and/or look up info.” They each contributed as they began discussing the concert parameters, then they divided up the tasks among them, each volunteering for duties that naturally employed their strengths. Their focus was on equal power and equal voice. This focus continued during their November 6th meeting as they

discussed their upcoming presentation to the rest of the Ensemble about song suggestions for the concert. They wanted the Ensemble to divide into groups to come up with song suggestions, but they wanted to assign those groups. When I asked why, they explained that they wanted to mix the sections, mix the gender, and mix the people “so you’re with someone different from you.” They also wanted to make sure there was one student leader in each group to help keep everyone focused and answer any questions. It was during this meeting that they also set their goals for the concert.

By the November 15th meeting, the student leaders had solidified their collaborative interactions and unofficially defined my role in this planning process. Not realizing this, I interjected information into their discussion on whether or not to include LGBTQ statistical data in their concert information. They all abruptly stopped their discussion, resulting in a brief but awkward silence. In the observation notes I wrote that the resulting “pause in their discussion [was] almost like I was intruding or raining on their parade so to speak. I was careful not to insert myself again unless absolutely necessary or asked to do so.” I later reflected, “I feel like they had a role for me (teaching the music and conducting, accompanying) and they wanted me to stick to that role and let them plan.” The leaders already felt more empowered, and their awkward silence after my interruption demonstrated their newly developed ownership of the project.

The leaders’ plan for the song suggestion process with Ensemble was carried out on December 8, 2023, and their ability to share power and work collaboratively served as a model for the other Ensemble members. My field notes describe how the leaders led the

Ensemble members in the song suggestion process, effectively removing teacher influence from song nominations and allowing the student leaders to discuss with their classmates instead. The leaders wrote the concert topics on the board and then read off the assigned groups they had organized. During a previous class period, the leaders had discussed the topics with the class, so this class period could be fully devoted to song suggestions. Other than giving a quick reminder to be “expansive and diverse” in their song suggestions, I simply sat and observed. The dialogue, collaboration, and shared power within the class were evident in my field notes:

They are currently sprawled out on the floor in their various groups, interacting both within each group and across groups as they look up songs. They are asking for clarifications from each other on some of the topics and assistance with classifying songs to certain mental health topics. They are jumping in and helping each other very cooperatively and in a relaxed and easy manner. No arguing over who is right or possessiveness. They also joke around about songs to not choose — demonstrating an understanding of what they need to look for. They are also complimenting each other’s choices “that is smart” or “oh I love that song — that’s good” — very supportive.

The student leaders demonstrated an assumed power and expertise but without dominance, which allowed the other students to respond positively and appropriately. I asked each group to turn in their song suggestions to me so I could compile them all. Each list contained song suggestion titles, along with links to favorite recordings. Many also contained sentences of explanation, detailing why students thought the piece fit a

specific topic. Every song suggestion list was labeled only according to the group, not the individual students. The students chose not to list which student had suggested which song; they considered it a collaborative effort.

The leaders then used those lists to make the final song selections for the concert, taking their classmates suggestions and justifications into careful consideration and continuing their collaborative decision-making process. I completed an additional coding of the observation notes from those song selection leadership meetings to reflect the types of decision-making that occurred when discussing the song suggestions for each section of the concert: initial complete group agreement (CG), group agreement achieved after discussion reflecting differing individual perspectives (GI), and no agreement reached so decision made based on individual views only (IO). Table 16 depicts the resulting data, listing the concert sections in the order in which they were discussed, which the leaders re-ordered and re-named for the concert event to better depict their stories and goals. The student leaders later omitted the Schizophrenia section because they felt it lacked relevance for their peers.

Table 16

Decision Making Amongst Student Leaders During Song Selection Process

Section of Concert	Type of Decision-Making		
	CG	GI	IO
Anxiety	X	X	
Burnout	X	X	
Depression	X	X	
Loneliness	X	X	
Eating Disorders	X	X	
Suicide/Self-Harm	X	X	X
Schizophrenia	X	X	
General	X	X	

Notice the high level of dialogue and group decision-making between the students. Their collaborative decision-making reflected both automatic group agreement (CG) and group agreement reached after differing perspectives were discussed (GI), showing that the leaders worked to reach an agreement even when their initial views differed from each other. Only one category, Suicide/Self-Harm, contained any IO decisions where agreement was not necessarily reached, but out of respect and sensitivity the leaders chose to observe and dignify differing views without in-depth discussion or explanation.

With many of the song suggestions, the leaders quickly came to a consensus that a song either was or was not appropriate, resulting in most of the CG (initial complete agreement as a group) decisions. These were often the result of songs that obviously did or did not fit the topic based on their shared teenage experiences at the school.

GI decisions (group agreement reached after discussion reflecting differing individual perspectives) occurred when the lyrics, style, genre, or perspective of the song needed more discussion. An example of a GI decision concerned the song “Nobody” (Mitski, 2018). The song was suggested for the topic of loneliness. Steve liked the style of the song and felt it was different from many of the other songs they had picked, but Izzy and Amelia were concerned about the lyrics. Izzy noted “it’s on the borderline of being a bit too romantic.” Steve reread the lyrics, and they all agreed to reconsider the song later. When they came back to re-examine the song, they all determined that it was not the right fit for the concert. The discussion over the song “Getting Older” (Eilish, 2021) resulted in a group agreement that ended quite differently. The song had been suggested under the topic of anxiety. Steve was not very familiar with the song and was

not initially in favor of it, however Izzy and Amelia mentioned that it talked about more of a “growing up type of anxiety,” although they had difficulty really clearly explaining that connection. Amelia felt that part of the issue was its connection to the topic, so she suggested that it might be more appropriate for burnout. When the leaders re-read the lyrics from a burnout perspective, they all agreed it was a good fit and decided to include the song in the concert.

The only section of the concert that contained any IO (individual decisions without group consensus) was the self-harm section. The passion and sensitivity of this topic resulted in the leaders deciding not to include certain pieces without pressuring anyone for an explanation. If a leader expressed concern over a song, the other leaders agreed to not include that song without discussion. It was a show of respect for each other, but it also reflected the understanding they had of the topic. From their research and personal experiences, they realized the necessity of being sensitive to each other’s boundaries. They did not want to force a discussion if someone was not ready to be that personally revelatory.

As the planning process grew, so did the leaders’ abilities to work fluidly with each other. By the time the leaders were determining the concert order and working on other aspects of the concert event overall, they had begun to trust each other enough to fall into a sort of routine during the leadership meetings. All of them would take part in discussions, but Izzy usually took notes, which she would later share with the other leaders. Izzy was also the organizer of the group. This was evident in my observation notes from the leadership meeting on January 25, 2024. During a discussion about

teacher interviews, “Izzy got out her computer and began creating a google sheet that she shared with everyone. The [other leaders] suggested several teachers they wanted to contact...Izzy added all the names to the spreadsheet.” During discussions, the other leaders would look up information on their phones or computers and send Izzy a link to anything that needed to be included in the notes. I also took notes and sent the leaders an email after each meeting that contained a basic meeting summary and their agreed upon to-do list. The last few months of the planning process, they tended to divide duties as follows:

- Izzy sent most of the professional emails to the outside community service organization.
- Amelia conducted most of the teacher interviews and shared the information with the rest of the group.
- Steve continued to arrange music.
- Sophie and Rob (the newest member of the leadership team) would assist where needed, often responding to requests by the other leaders.

However, the big decisions regarding the concert event continued to be collaborative decisions; their individual jobs and duties as leaders were to fulfill the leadership group’s vision, which was continually shaped and nuanced through their discussions with the other Ensemble members.

Shared Power and Dialogue During Class. To ensure that dialogue was not limited just to leadership meetings, members of the leadership team led more in-depth and specific discussions about each piece during class before rehearsals for each work

began. These specialized discussions contextualized each song and sparked new discussions amongst Ensemble members about the meaning and interpretation of each work. I reflected in my field notes, “these discussions were rarely long, but they were powerful and honest.”

To provide personalized contextualization for the general chorus students who had larger classes and were less comfortable with the vulnerability that could be experienced in a discussion format, I provided reflective written assignments. These assignments, completed as google docs, provided a more confidential and private manner of dialogue between teacher and student through google doc comments. I designed the questions in these assignments to encourage students to connect the songs with their own lives or the world around them. I included questions such as “write your interpretation of what the lyrics might mean and give an example of how they might apply to you, someone you know, or the students in general at this school” connected with lyrics from the song “Anonymous Ones” (Pasek et al., 2021). In some of the questions, I asked students to connect secular songs with the religious environment of the school to help them cross contextual boundaries with the music. Regarding the song “Louder Than Words” (Larson, 1990/2021), I asked students to “give an example of something from either St. Augustine’s teachings or life, or the life and teachings of Jesus that demonstrate the power of action (as opposed to just talking about something).” Some of those general chorus student responses were later used anonymously (but with permission) by Ensemble members in the concert readings.

Shared Power and Dialogue During Final Concert Event Preparations.

During the final few weeks before the concert, the students worked together to complete much of the logistical preparation for the concert. Ensemble members created PowerPoint slides for the pre-concert slide show in the auditorium. As their teacher, I gave a few parameters regarding the slides, discussing how each song should have at least one slide providing background information about the song and one slide offering more contextual information, relating the song to something personal or the general student body at the school. Unfortunately, I then tried to prescribe the process by which the slides would be completed. I had hoped to ensure equitable division of opportunities to reflect on the various lyrics contained within the songs, but those intentions, while well-meaning, were not particularly effective. The students created powerful slides that first day, but my elaborate system designed to “appropriately divide up the duties” was more of a detriment than a help. After that class period of slide work, I wrote in my field notes:

The system I devised wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t great either. I had hoped to provide a nice way of dividing things up and spreading it all out amongst everyone, but I think my system was too prescribed. Since this was supposed to be their voice, I should have also let them figure out their own system of doing it.

I alleviated teacher interference before the next class period by being less prescriptive, and the students worked much more efficiently and collaboratively. I had learned my lesson, so when the leaders later discussed concert night duties with the rest of the Ensemble members, I steered clear. They divided up their duties and everyone had a job to do on the night of the concert event. My field notes on March 14, 2024 listed many of

the last-minute details handled by the students:

There was a lot that was done in these last few days. Izzy finished coordinating with [service organization]: organizing stuff for donations, picking up literature from them, picking up donation boxes, and speaking at chapel [to the student body] about the concert and donations. All of leadership finished up the PowerPoint slides . . . Sophie and Rob told me what they needed for the “How Are You” [interactive exhibit] (post-its and pens) and Sophie made little signs for it. We divided up the various pre- and post-concert duties between the leadership members. Pre-concert duties included set-up in the lobby, being in charge of the “how are you” station, and encouraging audience members to interact with the art activities in the lobby. Post-concert duties included helping our school counselor at the donation and literature table, mingling with guests, and pickup and cleanup at the end of the night.

The duties were numerous, but the student leaders had a plan, and they asked the other Ensemble members to divide up and help with each of the tasks, ensuring that everything would be completed as needed. The night of the concert event, the students received adult assistance with set-up before audience members started arriving, mainly carrying tables and supplies, but the students did the bulk of work. Once the public began to arrive, the students were fully responsible for the lobby until the concert began. During the performance, the leaders took charge of keeping the event running, then finished up the night back in the lobby to thank guests for attending and begin the close-up and clean-up duties.

Power Dynamics Data in Interviews. Several of the individuals interviewed mentioned the increase in student power. For the adults interviewed, the shift in power dynamics was evident in the prevalence of student voice during the concert event, which was manifested in various ways. Matthew noted the strong student perspective coming through in the concert readings:

It was all . . . the language . . . and even in the scope of the narrative pieces, it was all language that you could tell was coming from them. They were not reading stuff someone else had written or just reading stuff that they had researched . . . those kind of resources might have influenced their narrative pieces, but they had themselves written it.

By contrast, Kathy felt that the different musical styles reflected the diversity of the student perspectives, “because of the different styles – you had some Christian, you had some country, and you had some pop.” Alice noted the power of the students in selecting the focus of the concert, “what an awesome experience it was for that group . . . especially letting them have a lot of input into the theme.” For Jenny, it was the experience overall that reflected student input and dialogue, “the music was . . . you know [the students] had input in selecting it, and the students coming to the podium and introducing the different segments . . . they were very connected and had buy-in. And . . . as the student leaders spoke that set a different tone . . . this was student driven.” Anna agreed, “you could definitely tell it was young person centered.”

Although they were not leaders, the two student participants interviewed felt the shift in power dynamics, noting the power, voice, and control they had throughout the

experience. James noted that as an Ensemble participant, “a lot of it was on us . . . we definitely had a more hands on . . . just with the slide show and the leadership committee helping more with the song choice, it felt kind of like it was kind of for us.” Harry also felt that he had power as a participant, “the songs were picked by us . . . we were able to talk amongst groups and figure out what songs we liked . . . I think that everyone at least had a song that they suggested.” He felt that the leadership group had shared their power “I think they were able to share their power with us as Ensemble members.” Harry smiled as he noted the difference in power between this concert experience and previous concerts, “I felt almost on the same level as [the teacher].” Harry also commented on the dialogue between all of them as students during the music learning process, “It made me consider the fact that my understanding of a song is not always someone else’s.”

The two student leaders interviewed relayed several aspects of the power dynamics that they found significant. For Amelia, the readings she wrote were a strong form of personal expression and power. Regarding the leadership process overall she commented, “just being able to be a part of the leadership and creating the focus, it was just like, I was able to put my ideas and my thoughts into it, even if they weren’t always used.” Steve commented on the workload and his responsibilities, “well, I played a much more direct role, like arranging three songs . . . it was a lot . . . and actually sitting here for three hours picking the songs.” But Steve and Amelia were not just focused on their own power. Amelia commented, “everyone’s voice was heard, it’s like we had a collective conversation.” And Steve acknowledged, “everything that was offered, every song . . . it was like a collection of unique ideas.” Regarding the power dynamics, Amelia

jokingly stated, “um, I felt very powerful!” But jokes aside, both Steve and Amelia felt that the power was shared equally both amongst the leaders and between the leaders and me as the teacher. Amelia commented:

Overall I feel like we kind of equally shared the power, if there were things we were struggling on . . . we communicated enough and a lot so no one felt like super stressed with all of the stuff being put on them . . . [and] it was really nice being able to like have that responsibility and being able to do more, and I felt like overall as a group we had a lot of power in how it was planned and you [the teacher] let us like choose the focus, and how we wanted to focus it and have our voices heard.

Steve agreed, adding a nuanced perspective on the unique power of such a collaboration:

We all shined in different ways and it . . . was just brought together much better than if it had been just me. It never really felt like one person had all the control, like even with us and you [referring to me as the teacher], it was all just equal . . . It’s not like one person was the leader and the others were this or this, it was just each of us had something different to give to it.

Ultimately, it was not a single student voice or perspective that shone through but a collective narrative. This narrative was expressed more clearly through the student goals for the concert.

Student Leadership Goals for the Concert

The collective narrative of the student leaders’ views and perspectives on mental health amongst themselves and their peers was established, in part, through the student

leadership's goals for the concert. These goals, created by the leadership committee and embraced through shared power dynamics and dialogue, demonstrate an awareness of the prevalence of mental health concerns within the students' school community and the community's response or avoidance of addressing those concerns. The student leadership goals also express an intentionality in addressing such community avoidance. Such specific awareness and intentionality demonstrate meaningfulness and relevance for the student leaders during the concert planning process and the culminating concert event. The goals also show a desire by the leaders to inspire meaningfulness and relevance for others.

The student leaders established their goals for the concert during a leadership meeting on November 6, 2023. At this point in the process, there were still just four leaders, Amelia, Steve, Izzy, and Sophie (the fifth leader, Rob, would not join the leadership team until January). The goals established focused on their immediate school community, but encompassed the wider surrounding community as well, especially concerning people their own age. Amelia wanted to bring awareness regarding mental health issues and address the isolation mental health conditions can bring. She felt it was important to stress to people "you're not alone." She also wanted to present people with resources, so they know "how to get help." Steve, too, wanted to bring awareness, but with more experiential focus. Familiar with the casual dismissal many of his peers had received regarding their mental health concerns, he hoped to help people understand that "mental health issues are a real thing." He emphasized that it was important to do that in a supportive, non "accusatory" manner. Sophie also leaned toward the reality aspect of

mental health, but with the addition of acceptance, noting that the issue of mental health problems, especially among teenagers, “is something and it’s not going away.” Izzy wanted to bring awareness and acceptance, specifically mentioning that she wanted to reduce the “stigma” associated with mental health, something she felt was commonly experienced by teens in the school community. The leaders used these four goals: awareness of mental health conditions, acknowledgement of the reality of mental health concerns, needing or offering help or support, and accepting others or reducing stigma as cornerstones for their concert planning.

It was through these student goals that the leaders were able to express their own voices, weaving a type of collective narrative about their views on mental health and what they considered important. Their goals focused their narrative and emboldened their decisions. The student leaders’ empowerment came through sharing those views in songs, readings, and activities.

Student Goals in Observation Notes of Leadership Meetings. Once the student leaders established their goals for the concert, the discussions between leaders during the leadership meetings often incorporated aspects of those goals. This was particularly present during the song selection process. Table 17 shows how direct discussion of goals occurred in all three song selection leadership meetings.

Table 17*Discussion of Specific Goals During Song Selection Process*

Leadership meetings	Awareness	Help/Support, Call-to-Action	Acceptance, Reality, Societal Pressure
Initial song meeting 12/13/23 – begin narrowing down song list	X	X	
Leadership mtg 1/4/24 – further narrowing down song selections	X	X	X
Leadership mtg 1/11/24 – working song order and finalized song list	X	X	X

The initial song meeting lasted three hours, but the student leaders stayed focused for the duration of the meeting. Their main priority when narrowing down the song suggestions were song lyrics. The leaders first determined whether or not a song “fit the topic” and whether or not the lyrics accurately depicted the specific mental health topic being discussed (based on their personal experience and their research). Several song suggestions did not pass this first round of cuts. The song “Pretty When You Cry” (Del Ray & Stranathan, 2014) did not relate to depression and Amelia observed that in some cases, people were “making suggestions because they listen to a piece of music when they feel a certain way, but that’s not actually what the song is about.” One song suggestion, “I Can’t Handle Change” (Evans, 2010) made a good first impression on the leaders musically, with Steve even noting that the musical intro “feels like anxiety.” However, the leaders were less thrilled with the applicability of lyrics. Ultimately, the leaders did not choose to make the song a part of the concert because of their dislike for the lyrics. Another song suggestion that was cut by the leaders for lyrics that did not

relate was the song “Champagne Problems” (Swift, 2020a). It was suggested for the topic of depression, but while playing the song and examining the lyrics, both Izzy and Amelia quickly exclaimed that the song was “not about depression.” The other leaders agreed.

After discussing the appropriateness of a song to the topic, the leaders then debated whether or not it addressed the goals of the concert they had established. Izzy noted that the lyrics in “This is Me Trying” (Swift, 2020b) reflected the hopelessness students often feel when their grades do not meet the high expectations of their parents, even though they spent time studying and striving to understand the material. The leaders chose to include that song in the concert. On the other hand, the song “Growing Sideways” (Kahan, 2022) was not selected for the concert because even though it spoke about the topic, it did not specifically fit the leadership’s goals. After reading the lyrics, Izzy noted, “it’s not really the angle we’re aiming for” although she did “like the lyrics about anger.” The song “Young and Sad” (Cyrus, 2020) produced a mixed reaction from the leaders. It was not a piece of music they knew, and they did not enjoy listening to it, but they appreciated the unique perspective and mood of the piece. Izzy noted how the song expressed the viewpoint of someone “wanting to close yourself off and live in the pain,” a sentiment they felt many teenagers experienced. They included the song in the concert because they believed that such a perspective needed to be represented and acknowledged.

Sometimes, the examination of the lyrics of a song caused the leaders to rethink music they already knew. When the song “What Was I Made For” (O’Connell & O’Connell, 2023) was first brought up, the leaders were unenthusiastic. They had all

heard the song before but were hesitant to embrace it. None of them had yet seen the Barbie movie, and the song was featured prominently in it. However, once they examined the lyrics, they changed their opinion of the song, noting it would be “really good” for the concert. When deciding between two songs they already knew, “Anonymous Ones” (Pasek et al., 2021) and “Disappear” (Pasek & Paul, 2017a), they professed to like both songs and initially appeared to lean more towards choosing “Disappear” (Pasek & Paul, 2017a). However, after analysis of the lyrics, they chose “Anonymous Ones” (Pasek et al., 2021) because they all agreed with Amelia that it was a “better fit for the kids at our school.”

In other instances, the students chose a song due to its specific perspective. This was particularly evident in the “Body-Image and Self-Perception” section of the concert. The leaders could not initially decide between the songs “Pretty Isn’t Pretty” (Rodrigo, 2023) and “Scars To Your Beautiful” (Cara et al., 2015) until Izzy pointed out the difference in perspective and voice. They picked “Pretty Isn’t Pretty” (Rodrigo, 2023) because it was written in first person and more personal, presenting a first-hand account more relevant to teenage girls than the third person adult perspective presented in “Scars To Your Beautiful” (Cara et al, 2015). They also wanted a male perspective in that section of the concert and Steve’s suggestion of “Man In The Mirror” (Ballard & Garrett, 2011) was determined the best option because, as Amelia noted, it “dealt with personal insecurities.”

The leaders had to narrow down the list to a reasonable number of songs for a concert 60–90 minutes in length that would also contain readings. Because of those time

constraints, they sometimes had to decide between two songs with similar perspectives that fit the topic and the goals of the concert. In those instances, musical style and genre became a determining factor. They wanted a variety of styles and perspectives that would appeal to a wide array of audience members. They felt that they could not reach their goals if the audience was unable to relate to any of the music. This was a key factor in picking “Monday, Monday” (Phillips, 1966/2008) which Amelia pointed out was a “different style,” and “Old Man” (Bryan, 2020), which Steve suggested and Izzy noted presented a “parent perspective.” They also discussed the importance of relating to students but not being too one-sided in musical styles. Sophie, who was a big Taylor Swift fan, loved all of the Taylor Swift song suggestions and the group agreed that many were relevant to the concert. However, Sophie also wanted balance in the concert; she felt it was important that it did not “turn into a Taylor Swift concert,” so some of the Taylor Swift song suggestions were rejected in favor of works from other varying artists.

Student Goals in Song Lyrics. The prevalence of consideration for the concert goals during the song selection process resulted in all of the concert songs relating to at least one of the goals in some manner. Table 18 lists the songs in concert order and indicates what goals were addressed in the lyrics. The goals of awareness and reality were prevalent throughout the concert, but the goals of acceptance (whether encouraging acceptance or acknowledging the negativity of societal pressure) and help (including offering support, seeking help, or issuing a call-to-action to others to help) were more prevalent in the later sections of the concert.

Table 18¹⁰*Student Concert Goals Contained Within Song Lyrics*

Song Lyrics	Awareness	Reality	Help/Support, Call-to-Action	Acceptance, Societal Pressure
“Will I”	X	X		
“Save Me”	X	X	X	
“In My Blood”	X	X	X	X
“Lifeboat”	X	X		X
“Monday, Monday”	X			X
“Old Man”	X	X		X
“This Is Me Trying”	X	X		X
“Getting Older”	X	X		X
“What Was I Made For?”	X	X		X
“Young and Sad”	X	X		X
“Rescue”	X		X	X
“Need You Now”	X	X		
“Waving Through A Window”	X	X		X
“Man in the Mirror”	X		X	
“Pretty Isn’t Pretty”	X	X		X
“Anonymous Ones”	X	X	X	X
“How To Save A Life”	X		X	X
“Keep Holding On”	X		X	X
“I’m Still Standing”	X			
“Louder Than Words”	X		X	X

The song lyrics met the goals in different ways. Some songs contained lyrics with thought provoking questions. These songs met some of the concert goals by encouraging reflection. The lyrics of the opening song, “Will I” (Larson, 1996), gently introduced audience members to the reality of dealing with mental health through very short, yet serious and deliberate questions. In the concert event context, these questions had the potential to promote awareness in receptive audience members. The song “What Was I

¹⁰ As noted previously, song titles in Tables are listed without writer/authorship information for ease and clarity of viewing. Readers are encouraged to look at the references pages at the end of the dissertation where appropriate authorship and production information is listed for each song.

Made For” (O’Connell & O’Connell, 2023) also urged audience members to think and reflect. Containing lyrics with difficult to answer questions and occurring within the “Spotlight on Depression” section of the concert event, the song brought to light the mental state of depression and the lingering doubts those suffering with depression may experience.

Alternatively, some songs depicted the concert goals of awareness and reality using description, making special use of metaphor and vivid imagery to depict various emotional and mental states. The lyrics in the song “Lifeboat” (O’Keefe & Murphy, 2014) metaphorically depicted the feelings of living with anxiety by describing a crowded lifeboat, using vivid words with negative connotations. Similarly, “Waving Through A Window” (Pasek & Paul, 2017b) offered a metaphorical description of loneliness using imagery that depicted exclusion (physical barriers to participation) and isolation (remoteness sometimes found in nature).

Other songs depicted concert goals with lyrics that bluntly and openly described the feelings and experiences of someone dealing with mental health issues. The song “Getting Older” (Eilish, 2021) candidly described the emotions of someone suffering from burnout, including the resulting listlessness and apathy. The lyrics in the song “Pretty Isn’t Pretty” (Rodrigo, 2023) presented an even more blunt depiction during the concert event. The song’s lyrics revealed the personal feelings and emotions of dealing with body-image issues and accusatorily described the societal norms and social media pressure placed on teenage girls to achieve just the right image, bringing in the acceptance goal as well. The first verse described the desperate feelings of someone who

does not like their appearance, but as the song progressed, the lyrics depicted ever-increasing feelings of frustration as the pressure of society and social media was revealed in more detail. The intensity of the lyrics emphasized the strong feelings of anger and hopelessness felt by many teenage girls and stressed the negativity associated with body-image.

Some songs combined awareness and reality with the acceptance goal in a manner that suggested asking or pleading for acceptance. Lyrics from the song “Young and Sad” (Cyrus, 2020) bluntly depicted the reality of depression and asked for acceptance, craving understanding instead of judgement. The lyrics of the song “Anonymous Ones” (Pasek et al., 2021) brought awareness to teenage mental health issues in general by using both metaphor and direct language to describe feelings and experiences, using those potential shared experiences to solicit acceptance and petition for support. Lyrics that depicted typical teenage encounters in school and the quest for achievement provided the common ground upon which to ask for such acknowledgement.

There were a few songs in the concert that focused primarily on help or support and acceptance, rather than awareness and reality. The song “Rescue” (Daigle, 2020) addressed those goals with lyrics that emphasized the listening, trust, and dependability that one hopes for in a caring relationship. “How To Save A Life” (Fray, 2006) also contained lyrics with a focus on support, but much more directly. The lyrics actually offered instructions for helping someone in a self-harm crisis, listing out steps of action and explaining some of the difficulties one might encounter. The song’s lyrics also described the potential resulting loss of not reaching out. The final song of the concert,

“Louder Than Words” (Larson, 1990/2021), went beyond simply asking for support or offering help, it demanded support with a sort of call-to-action. The lyrics of the verses asked several pointed questions, which are then followed by an ultimatum of sorts in the chorus, demanding a response from the listeners.

Student Goals in Concert Readings. All but one of the concert readings and the closing remarks were written and presented at the concert event by students. These readings, written by student leaders, reflected the leaders’ goals through the presentation of reflections, stories, informative facts from their research, and input from non-leader Ensemble members. Table 19 depicts the prevalence of the concert goals within the concert readings.

Table 19

Student Concert Goals Found Within Concert Readings

Concert Readings	Awareness	Reality	Help/Support, Call-to-Action	Acceptance, Societal Pressure
Shining A Light On Mental Health	X	X		
Anxiety	X	X		
Burnout	X	X		
Depression	X	X	X	
Bringing Light Into The Darkness	X		X	X
Loneliness	X	X	X	
Body-Image and Self-Perception	X	X		
Bringing Others Into The Light	X	X	X	X
Self-Harm	X		X	
Keeping the Light Shining			X	
Closing Remarks			X	

In some cases, non-leader Ensemble members and leaders collaborated to the point that the non-leader chose to present a reading at the concert event rather than the original student leader author. These personal and meaningful exchanges between leaders and non-leaders increased the already strong connective tissue amongst the Ensemble members and their sense of ownership. The differing presenters and authors also provided a level of anonymity at the concert event from the audience perspective. Before the concert began, it was publicly announced that all readings were student-written (except for self-harm) but not all authors were reading their own material. While some readings used personal pronouns that inferred authorship, others did not, so the audience did not know who had authored which reading. This perception of anonymity by the audience provided the students with a level of personal security and gave many of the readings a sense of coming from the students collectively rather than from a single individual.

The exceptions to that anonymity and authorship were the closing remarks, which I presented, and the reading for the self-harm section of the concert event. Creating a reading for self-harm and body-image issues was difficult for multiple reasons. Asking a student to present information on self-harm in front of an audience placed that student in a very vulnerable position. The reading presented would need to carefully provide information that helped audience members understand the existence of self-harm within the school without being overly descriptive and accusatory, encourage Christ's love and acceptance as promoted by the school, and make sure that nothing was presented in a manner that romanticized the idea of self-harm. Due to those difficulties, the self-harm reading was written and read by a faculty member from the theology department who was

aware of the student leaders' ideas regarding the topic.

The other readings (all student-written), reflected a strong presence of the leader's goals, sometimes very bluntly stated. In his readings, which he both wrote and presented, Steve worked to enunciate the concert goals directly to the audience. In the reading for the opening section ("Shining a Light on Mental Health"), Steve wrote of the reality of mental health, "Many of us go through issues that we prefer to keep in the dark. Anxiety. Burnout. Depression. Loneliness. Self-harm." Then he brought to light the awareness goal, "Tonight, we will shine a light on these struggles [mental health issues]. Through our performance, we strive to bring awareness to these very real challenges and give hope to those who live in the dark." Later in the concert, during his reading for the section entitled "Bringing Light into the Darkness," Steve wrote of support and acceptance:

This performance tonight is to show all of you that whatever struggles you are facing, whatever tough spot you're working through, you are not alone. You are surrounded by so many people that love you and deeply care about you . . . You are not hidden. You are not forgotten.

In his reading for the final section of the concert ("Keeping the Light Shining"), Steve left the audience with an inspiring goal related appeal to "keep shining the light."

Rather than state the goals, the other readings worked to help fulfill the student goals of the concert through information, descriptions, emotional pleas, and testimonies. In the anxiety reading, Amelia built awareness using two different approaches: through information and personalization. She presented researched, factual information such as a definition, "an intense, excessive, and persistent worry and fear about everyday

situations,” but she also presented personalized emotional testimony, “sometimes it feels as if the entire world is about to collapse onto me and it is terrifying.” She then proceeded to relate some of the physical reality of dealing with anxiety, mentioning her “heart beating faster . . . clammy hands . . . feel[ing] as though [her] lungs are collapsing.”

In the depression reading, Rob tried to build awareness into his writing by teaching the audience about the condition, relaying its complexity and consequences. He wrote of the “sinking feeling provided by this illness” and described it as a condition that “can’t possibly be controlled by simple means.” In the loneliness reading, which she wrote and presented, Izzy used the quotes of others, combined with her own words, to bring awareness and relay the reality of feeling alone, “truly lonely . . . at rock bottom . . . left with nothing but your vices.” However, she also offered the school community as a means of support, “you can lean on me, on us, on [our school].” That sense of community infused into some of the readings, combined with the idea of the readings presenting a collective voice and quotes from various students, allowed for a more interactive listening approach for both the performers and the audience.

Student Goals in the Non-Performative Aspects of Concert Event. In addition to the on-stage performative aspects, the concert event also reflected student goals through other means. Before the concert started, the interactive lobby activities and PowerPoint slide show running on the auditorium big screen helped the audience connect to the material in different ways, often reinforcing some of the concert goals. Audience members reading the concert program learned about the concert’s focus. After the concert, the lobby provided a place for gathering but also for potential support. The

presence of those student goals in these non-performative aspects of the concert event is exhibited in Table 20, below.

Table 20

Presence of Student Goals in Non-Performative Aspects of Concert Event

Concert Event	Awareness	Reality	Help/Support, Call-to-Action	Acceptance, Societal Pressure
Slides	X	X	X	X
Concert Program	X	X	X	X
Lobby Activities	X		X	

The interactive lobby activities before the concert did not address specific mental health topics, but they did encourage audience members to be reflective, self-aware, and supportive, states of being that aligned with the student leadership goals of awareness and support. The “What Makes You Happy” interactive art activity asked audience members to think about what truly made them happy, while the fingerprinting community project demonstrated each individual’s part of creating a whole community. The “How Are You?” sticky note project led by Ensemble members allowed audience members to anonymously express their feelings, and the results included both positive and negative answers, some of which demonstrated the relevance of the concert topics. Among the various answers were responses that spoke of the realities of living with some of the mental health issues mentioned in the concert. Anxiety was demonstrated through comments such as “scared” and “anxious.” Burnout came through in responses that included “overwhelmed” and “exhausted.” One audience member wrote “on an island,” a metaphor for loneliness.

Help and support were the focus of certain lobby activities both before and after the concert. Before the concert, audience members were encouraged to bring items to donate to a local community organization that assists individuals and families dealing with mental health issues and poverty, a form of offering or giving support and help. Ensemble members helped collect those donations. After the concert, audience members could still donate if they wished, but the support focus shifted from offering support to receiving it. Handouts with counseling hotlines and other mental health info were available for students and audience members to pick up, and the school counselor was present to answer any questions audience members might have.

Inside the auditorium, audience members encountered reflectiveness and student goals before the performance began through a different type of medium, PowerPoint slides. While seated in the auditorium, audience members viewed a student-created slide show about the concert music. Offering both background information on the music and personal connections, some of those slides addressed the student concert goals. On one of the slides about the song “Waving Through A Window” (Pasek & Paul, 2017b), a student brought awareness to the complexity of the reality of loneliness, writing “contrary to what many might think, most of the times my loneliness feels the worse is in the midst of a large crowd. Even amongst a large group of friends, I feel forgotten.” Similar confessional elements that presented the reality of mental health issues and encouraged awareness could be found on a slide about the song “What Was I Made For” (O’Connell & O’Connell, 2023). On the slide, the student described depressive episodes as feeling “mentally paralyzed and questioning whether they can even experience emotions at all.”

The physical concert program also gave hints as to the student leaders' goals for this concert. The title "You Are Not Alone – Shining A Light On Mental Health" indicated both support and awareness. The program also acknowledged the reality that some people face and their potential need for help by including the phone number of a hotline for anyone that might need it.

Summary

The meaningfulness and relevance of the concert event and planning processes to the audience members, student participants, and student leaders were evident in a variety of data. The song lyrics and readings from the concert contained words that could encourage meaningfulness and relevance in those performing or listening, which was increased by the purposeful analysis and Care placed on those words by the student leaders. These words (whether song lyrics or reading passages), used emotion to encourage strong personal connections, metaphor and literal description to help people understand and relate, and more scientific or real-life information to educate. In field notes, observation notes, and interviews, students and audience members demonstrated meaningfulness by showing importance to something, demonstrating a sense of ownership over the project or outcome, or by showing a strong sense of personal engagement or emotional connection. Relevance in field notes, observation notes, and interviews was evident through relatedness to surroundings (personal, friends, family, or school), and future potential benefits (either educational or career). Students relayed meaningfulness and relevance throughout the project. Audience members relayed meaningfulness and relevance of numerous aspects of the concert event.

The dialogic aspect of the project demonstrated power dynamics that were different from a traditional choral classroom. Those power dynamics, indicating shared power between teacher and students and a collaborative effort amongst the students themselves, were evident in field notes, observation notes, and interviews. The leadership committee demonstrated their shared power throughout the planning process, making decisions collectively regarding song selections, presentations, concert organization and flow, teacher interviews, interactive lobby exhibits, and the running of the actual concert event. Evidence of dialogue and shared power was also present through the music arranging, since one student leader arranged some of the music the students sang, and the resulting in-class discussions and adjustments to interpretation reflected the on-going interaction and meaning-making between the music and the topic of mental health. Student participants felt that the leadership had shared some of that power through their involvement in making song suggestions and discussing the meaning behind the various musical numbers.

Because of those power dynamics, student leaders were able to establish their own goals for the concert. It was their adherence to these goals that led to the data for the final research question. The student leaders' goals included bringing awareness of mental health issues to audience members, helping audience members and students understand some of the realities of living with various mental health conditions, letting everyone know that it was ok to ask for help while also encouraging those who were able to offer support to others, and encouraging everyone to increase their acceptance of those dealing with mental health issues. These goals shaped the decisions of the leaders throughout the

planning process, and were evident in the song selections, concert readings, concert title and program, interactive lobby exhibits, concert slides, presentations of the material to other Ensemble members, and service component of the concert event. The expression of these goals in all these areas provided a means of empowerment, allowing student voice and perspective to shine through during the concert event. Through the use of their voices, the students created a collective narrative, which I will discuss in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: A Meaningful and Relevant Social Justice Story Told Through Care

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine some of the effects of a caring dialogic choral teaching approach and the resulting student led social justice concert in a private college preparatory high school. This research was guided by one primary research question and two secondary research questions: (1) How do students and audience members experience meaningfulness and relevance of a student-led social justice concert that was the product of a dialogic choral project? (2) In what ways, if any, did students feel that the dialogic power dynamics between teacher and students affect the classroom and learning? And (3) In what ways, if any, did students feel that their goals for the project promoted student voice and empowerment through storytelling? It was hoped that the caring dialogic approach would enable effective implementations of pedagogic practices that were diversity-focused and critically minded, while also producing a concert that was relevant, meaningful, and empowering for the students involved.

During my first stages of data analysis, I found that my coding methods revealed meaningfulness, relevance, student voice, power sharing, and a stronger storytelling aspect than I had anticipated, but the evidence of Care was initially unclear to me and the strong emphasis on diversity I had wanted did not appear to be present. It was not until I started deeply analyzing and synthesizing my findings that I began to understand how all these elements worked together. It was through that interaction that I was able to recognize my students' collective vision and impact. To see that interaction, I had to rethink my analysis from Chapter 4.

My detailed coding had given me all the pieces I needed, but those pieces did not appear to fit together well, which created an incomplete picture that left out crucial data. I sifted back through my data, retrieving data I had previously dismissed as unfocused because it fit more than one category, and this data changed my overall understanding of the project. Through my re-examination of the findings, I found that these data that existed in multiple categories were some of the key connectors of the project, telling a story that was deeper and more complex than I had realized. The Care I had been searching for was evident in the data, foundationally woven through the interactions between the students. I had been too focused on the results of the project to see the importance of all the processes involved, processes that reflected Care.

Similarly, when I stepped back from my own definition of diversity and viewed the project from the perspectives of my students, I realized that the students were embracing the diversity they felt they needed. It might not fit my hoped-for definition of diversity, but it was no less valuable, and it demonstrated their critical understanding of their world. They may not have included as much diversity in non-Eurocentric music as I had wanted, but their choices reflected a deep diversity of views and perspectives surrounding their chosen topic of mental health. These new revelations in analysis reminded me that I had worked diligently to share power with my students and engage in dialogue yet had analyzed the data primarily based on my research and my perspective; to fully understand the data I needed to also see it through my students' eyes.

Through this chapter, I weave together the various perspectives and research to tell the story of the data from this project. Much like a piece of music unfolding, the story

of this data develops previously established themes but also introduces new ones. I build on my findings from Chapter 4, but I also cite some of the data that I had previously dismissed — those connectors that I had originally felt were unfocused because they fit more than one category. I present the data through multiple lenses: those of my students, my own perspective, and the numerous lenses of my theoretical research. Sometimes those lenses are in discord with one another, but as in music, it is that discord that propels the story forward towards the next resonant understanding. Much like the songs my students chose, this research has a constant rhythm to it, something that holds it all together, even when there is no sound. Although it was not evident to me at first, Care was this project's rhythm, and I try to indicate that throughout my Chapter 5 narrative.

Foundationally, I had already worked to establish a caring classroom, but through this research I became purposeful in the type of Care¹¹, focusing specifically on *caring for* and *caring with*. In my reflections from my field notes, I found several instances of the effects of *caring for* my students. In one such entry, I wrote that in every concert, Ensemble members should find something “relevant, meaningful (either educationally or personally), important (individually, socially, politically, or educationally), and fun.” Such ideals affected every aspect of my teaching on a daily basis, including the environment, the repertoire selection, the teaching methods, and the rehearsal practices. By combining purposeful Care with dialogue, I was able to create an environment in which my students were able to assert their own voices through a student-planned social

¹¹ As in previous chapters, I use uppercase “Care” to denote the specialized forms of care found in education research, in all its complexity. For general care used in the common and everyday sense of the word, I use lowercase “care.”

justice concert event — a focal point for this research.

As I will describe in more detail throughout this chapter, varying forms of Care permeated every aspect of this project and joined the other practical and theoretical elements together. With Care functioning in such a manner, I found that I needed a clarifying lens and approach through which to study my findings that would build upon the existing research in Care in education while also illustrating my logic and the conclusions drawn from my findings. To help analyze and explain my analysis, I created the *Educational Care Spiral* that I use throughout this analysis to provide a visual diagrammatic supplement to my textual descriptions.

The Educational Care Spiral and its Zones of Care

Noddings (2002) noted the complexity of care and specifically differentiated between *caring about* and *caring for* (2012, 2013, 2017), and Hendricks added the important elements of *caring with* (2021a, 2023, 2025). I have chosen to differentiate between various gradients of those forms of Care, describing them as zones within a relational cycle I call the *Educational Care Spiral (ECS)*, which is divided into five *Zones of Care*. The spiral begins with a point of *caring with* (Hendricks, 2021a, 2023, 2025) in the center, the focal point of the spiral and foundation of all other interactions. That center point is also the top point of the Zone 1 cone, *Equitable and Relational Caring With*. Drawing on the research of Hendricks (2021a, 2023, 2025) and applying it to my approach, I define Zone 1 interactions as those that demonstrate shared power, compassion, and relational accompaniment through *caring with*.

I purposely placed *caring with* at the center of the ECS because of the unique and

long-term position most music teachers hold in students' lives. Many music educators teach students for multiple years in a row. Through trust and dialogue, a long-term Zone 1 relationship can be developed with these students, which can increase the sense of Care in the classroom. This *caring with* positively affects both the students and the instructor and establishes a standard of Care that becomes an expectation within the classroom, providing new students that enter the space with an exemplar of the types of relationships that can be established through Care while providing returning students with a sense of safety and belonging. That sense of belonging and trust can become the character of a music program, driving the student involvement and interaction. I characterize Zone 1 interactions as driven more by intrinsic motivation than external performance accolades or grades.

Those intrinsic motivations found within Zone 1 can then encourage others to Care, bringing outsiders into the fold. This movement of outreach is visually depicted as you travel around the ECS (see Figure 7, p. 235). Moving forward (counterclockwise) along the spiral, the pathway then leads successively through Zones 2–5, which embrace varying forms of *caring about* and *caring for* (Noddings, 2012, 2013, 2017). I define Zone 2 as *Generalized Caring About*, which includes general well-being, concern, and awareness but is non-relational, impersonal, and non-specific. It is a broad cone that encompasses many subjects, peoples, and ideas. Zone 2 interactions can contain general relevance, but much of the motivation is based on extrinsic factors, not personal connection. Zone 2 encompasses the broadest and least critical interaction with the world outside of the classroom. Although important, the lack of depth and personal meaning

found in Zone 2 makes it more of a resting point that is not particularly motivating. It is through the continued encouragement of those students inhabiting Zone 1 that others might be inspired to continue their journey on the ECS

Continuing the journey on the spiral brings one to Zone 3, *Specialized Caring About*. It is slightly smaller than Zone 2 and includes concerns over specific problems or issues. Zone 3 is more personalized and all interactions within this zone are focused on certain individuals or groups, but those interactions are still primarily non-relational. As I will describe later, much of the dissertation data focused on relevance resides within Zones 2 or 3. Meaningfulness data could also reside in Zone 3 but are more likely to inhabit Zones 4 and 5. Zone 3 interactions demonstrate an increased critical awareness but still lack the intense relational motivation of *caring for*. However, it could be an important personal milestone for individuals, especially students, who realize for the first time that someone or something matters beyond the scope of their personal wants or desires, that others' views are just as important as their own in determining value.

Zone 3 interactions are likely to spark concern and curiosity, leading to continued progress around the ECS. Continuing to move around the spiral, I call Zone 4 *Caring About and Caring For Intermingling*. It includes specialized *caring about* that has increased emotion, intensity, and personalization. It is also, at times, relational, demonstrating definite carer and cared-for roles. However, the relational aspect is not fully established by all parties nor regularly reciprocated, so the *caring for* aspect is inconsistent and temporary. Increased meaningfulness and intrinsic motivation are both key components of this zone. There is also the potential for increased student voice. Zone

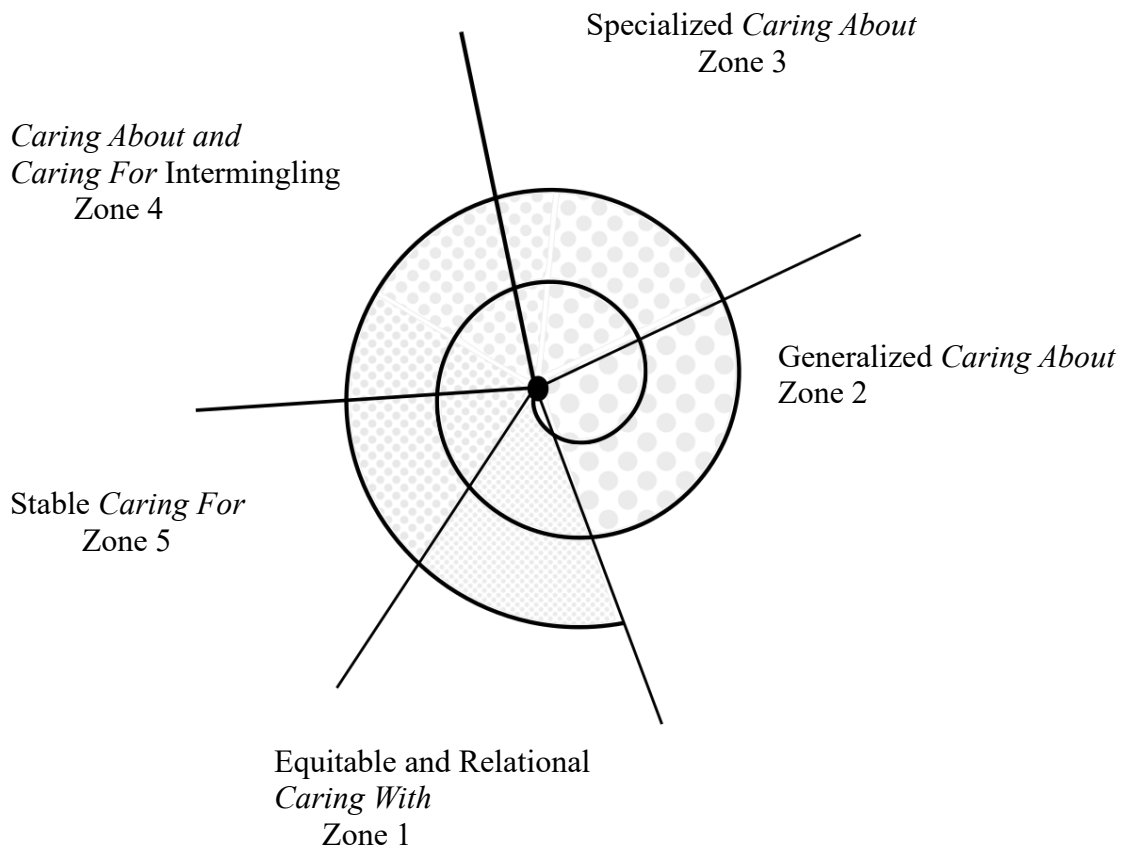
4 fulfills a transitional role, providing individuals with an opportunity to temporarily experience some of the vulnerability and responsibility that comes with *caring for* without the long-term obligation. Once the relationship is more fully developed and both parties are more comfortable, they can progress on to Zone 5.

Zone 5 is *Stable Caring For*, in which all care is fully relational and sustainable. Narrower than Zones 2–4, all interactions within this zone involve people that are emotionally invested and reciprocally engaged in carer and cared-for roles. This zone could be a final goal for many individuals, especially those in relationships with an inherent unequal power dynamic. However, those able and willing to restructure that power dynamic can continue moving forward on the spiral back to Zone 1. This time though, the position in Zone 1 is further from the center point, demonstrating the increased number of people and interactions that are now encompassed within that *caring with* zone. With every successive journey around the spiral, the size and impact within each zone increase as more people are impacted and involved.

My visual depiction begins and ends in Zone 1 to emphasize the focus and importance of that zone in my research. However, in prolonged application the spiral should continue, thereby demonstrating the increasing scope and effects of Care in the classroom and its potential sustainability. Figure 7 visually depicts the *Educational Care Spiral* (ECS). I have labeled each Zone within the ECS with its number and descriptive title.

Figure 7

The Educational Care Spiral



I will begin the analysis discussion with power dynamics, since the shift from monologic to dialogic interactions encouraged Zone 1 *caring with*, providing the foundation that supported and propelled the rest of the project forward. After discussing the power dynamic shift, I will then follow the spiral outward, progressing through Zones 2–5 as I place meaningfulness and relevance findings from artifacts, interviews, field notes, and observation notes in their appropriate zones to better understand their impact.

During the discussion, I will also relate some of the material to my other theoretical groundings and pedagogical underpinnings, including culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017), and critical pedagogy (Abrahams, 2005, 2017; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2005), noting the periodic discord between some of these important elements and Care, and discussing how that discord emphasized the meaningfulness and relevance of the project. Finally, I will examine the student goals as a core component of storytelling (Chapman, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). As I discuss the collective narrative told by the students at the concert event surrounding mental health, I will connect that narrative to critical pedagogy (Abrahams, 2005, 2017; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2005) and social justice (de Quadros, 2019), acknowledging the complicated and sometimes difficult to reconcile relationship between Care, social justice, and CP. Placing this discussion of the narrative on the ECS, I will then illustrate the strong modeling of Care demonstrated by the students, showing that the students' Care-full focus (*caring about* mental health, *caring for* others, and *caring with* each other in this endeavor) were crucial in making this a meaningful and empowering social justice event for themselves and many others.

The Power Dynamics Shift: Making the Necessary Changes to Progress Towards Zone 1

As mentioned in my purpose statement, I wanted to implement dialogic practices within my choral classroom. Adapting the community choir practices used by de Quadros and Amrein (2023), I tasked my students with making programming decisions, leading

aspects of rehearsals, writing or arranging music when possible, and engaging in meaning making with the music to embrace the type of co-constructed musical meaning described by Spruce (2015). In addition to those music education focused activities, I hoped the leaders would turn the concert into a social justice event, fulfilling the frames of activity described by de Quadros (2019).

All of these various activities and student responsibilities required a shift in power dynamics. I needed to give up a substantial amount of my power as a teacher yet retain respect and discipline within the classroom setting. To do this, I focused on Care. I had already incorporated general care in my classroom, but my research had led me to focus on specific forms of Care in my teaching. As noted previously, Noddings (2002) argued that care was essential to dialogue. By establishing a foundation in Care, I hoped to establish both collective and relational trust (Hendricks, 2018) with and among the group members, thereby increasing dialogue and the presence of student voice while also hopefully avoiding some of the problems described by Hess (2018b, 2021) such as exploitation of student views and discriminatory otherness.

Laying the Foundation Early in the School Year

Since care was already a subconscious aspect of my teaching, I made a conscious effort to increase it, focusing on relational care and striving to actively *care for* (Noddings, 2012, 2013, 2017) and *care with* (Hendricks, 2021a, 2023, 2025) my students. My field notes reveal various moments of this in my teaching in September 2023, before I began working on this specific concert planning with the leaders in October and rehearsing for this concert with the Ensemble later that winter. One aspect of

this was the classroom setup. My arrangement and organization for the select Ensemble group lent itself to trust and openness, as revealed in my background field notes:

The class sits in a circle around the piano, with me playing on the piano in the center... SA [sopranos and altos] are positioned by the long part of the piano, where I can make eye contact with them if needed for encouragement, to build confidence, and to promote connection. TB [tenors and basses] sit behind the keys (to my back) to encourage trust and risk-taking among the guys, especially since this is further removed from their comfort zone.

This environment was supported by caring teaching practices that I had begun in previous years with Ensemble, but about which I became more purposeful and consistent as I began this research. These practices encouraged positivity and safety through sincere communication where we dealt with disagreements openly and honestly and offered truthful and constructive critiques.

This positive modeling of *caring for* and *caring with*, combined with the already established friendships some of them shared, helped the students establish their own Caring relations with each other, the value of which I only began to fully understand after examining the data for this project. In my observation notes on September 18, 2023, I wrote “the camaraderie [between the Ensemble students] is excellent.” As the school year progressed, the Care-filled relationship between the students became more evident as the students really began to work together as an Ensemble family. That sense of family and mentorship felt by returning members was particularly evident during an October class when one of the pieces sung every year was introduced. I wrote in my field notes, “the

returning members are always excited to see everyone's reaction [to singing it for the first time]." The returning students lovingly and with good spirits helped the new members learn the song, complete with jokes and a well-earned cheer after the first run-through.

Within the Ensemble group, I made a point of emphasizing collaboration over competition, and process over product, so some of my Caring teaching practices focused on building trust and respect between the students. I encouraged trust through student decision making and a show of respect for student views. Student decisions increased collaboration and the sense of ownership by the group very early in the school year, then continued to build the trusting and collaborative dynamic as the year progressed.

My field notes revealed the joy experienced by the Ensemble students in choosing their own performance clothing, their first step in establishing their group identity for the school year. Section leaders regularly assisted in answering rehearsal questions and making rehearsal suggestions, but in a supportive not domineering manner, further fostering trust and respect. The students also showed respect and Care during classroom discussions, during which I encouraged students to share their opinions, even if those views conflicted with each other. We then worked together as a group to either reconcile our different views or Care-fully agree to disagree. My field notes from the first month of the school year provide an example of this. That first concert of the year typically includes a variety of music (including classical, gospel, musical theater, and pop) and features every Ensemble member in a solo. One of the solo songs for this group was a Taylor Swift song that some students loved and some strongly disliked. I had chosen to use the piece as a genre study and to help build the confidence of a student soloist who

was a huge Taylor Swift fan and working on building her low chest voice. The field notes from September 18, 2023 revealed the students' reactions to this piece during class, demonstrating their ability to disagree but still support each other:

We talked about the meaning of the Taylor Swift piece and that certainly helped everyone relate to it better, but some of the student just don't like it (I understand, neither do I). It was funny because Amelia loves the piece and Steve hates it, but last year Steve loved [country song sung by the group] and Amelia hated it. I pointed that flip-flop out today and they both laughed — Steve said, "I get it now" — but everyone worked to make sure the song sounded good.

Such a sense of community shows vulnerability, trust, and respect among the students: an ideal foundation for *caring with* (Hendricks, 2021a, 2023, 2025). As the *caring with* in the classroom increased for this project, it provided the essential foundation needed for the success of the project overall, laying the groundwork for the larger power dynamic shift and more direct dialogic components used during the planning and rehearsing processes for the student-led concert event.

Student Leadership for this Project

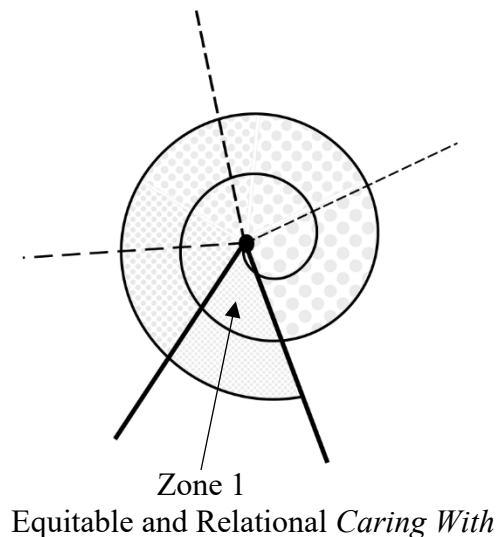
As noted previously, I did not assign leaders for this project. Instead, I invited students in Ensemble to volunteer to serve as leaders, without any restrictions. This was the first real act of student empowerment for this project. Freire (1970) argued that the oppressed must have a voice in achieving their own freedom, and I wanted to embrace that same ideal. I did not wish to force leadership upon students nor limit leadership opportunities for those interested; any Ensemble student who wished to lead could do so.

This established a more equitable power dynamic between me as their teacher and the self-selected student leaders.

This was an instance where Care supported CP. With Care already established firmly within the class, the other Ensemble members readily accepted those leaders and supported them, almost as if they had elected them. The Ensemble was functioning more like a community, much as Hess (2019b) suggested was possible, and *caring with* (Hendricks, 2021a, 2023, 2025) each other. On the ECS, this was the center point and line leading into the spiral in Zone 1. Figure 8 highlights the center point and Zone 1 position on the ECS.

Figure 8

Zone 1 on the ECS



Zone 1: Equitable and Relational *Caring With*

The interactions among the leaders during the leadership meetings were collaborative, sensitive, and Caring, consistently inhabiting Zone 1. Referring back to

Table 16 (Decision Making Amongst Student Leaders During Song Selection Process) in Chapter 4, most of the decisions during the song selection process were collaborative in nature, with students discussing their respective views and reaching agreements together. There were no heated arguments or sulky silences, no backstabbing, and no betrayals. Instead, the students operated within a circle of trust, honesty, and respect. This collaboration and *caring with* were typical throughout the planning. Both of the leaders interviewed remarked on this. The leaders also expressed the power of such *caring with* in their own ways, Amelia through her recognition of the empowerment she felt during the collaborative process, and Steve through his acknowledgement of everyone “shining” in their own way.

Both of the leaders’ expressions of this *caring with* demonstrated a collaboration and shared power that included sensitivity and mutual respect, focusing on each other’s strengths and supporting each other’s weaknesses. The result of such support and Care was an incredibly positive environment, an aspect I initially underestimated in my analysis. Amelia remarked in her interview that “the environment you created like with our small group with us specifically and in Ensemble was really positive.” Such positivity encouraged them to work as a team and *care with* each other in deeply profound ways. This project was not about what each of them wanted individually, but what they could accomplish together. The type of *caring with* that I had been trying to establish and implement in the classroom, they modeled and implemented amongst themselves.

The duties embraced by the student leaders were diverse, but their approaches continued to inhabit Zone 1. Steve had the music theory knowledge and skill level to

arrange some of the music, so he arranged three of the songs by himself, but always with the purpose of communicating and connecting with others. The work seemed to have a powerful effect on him. As I will explain in more detail later, the other students responded favorably to Steve's work, and Steve's connection with the music he arranged seemed to carry over to the other students as well. The other leaders did not possess such arranging skills, so I promoted dialogic listening (Lewis, 2020) and co-constructed meanings (Spruce, 2015) instead. Students could express their own stories and identities in a personal and meaningful manner by digging deeply into the lyrics of existing songs and choosing both the song repertoire and the interpretation of that repertoire. This meant that the student leaders led song selection and guided interpretation discussions. They researched the topics, presented the material to Ensemble, led the song suggestion process, chose the songs, then presented each of those songs to Ensemble as we began learning them, encouraging further analysis and discussion by the group as a whole. This allowed the songs to take on new meanings specifically significant to these students and this concert, making the experience one that could be considered part of a living and vitalized praxis rather than a relic of old traditions, a re-interpretation of Regelski's (2006) recommendations. Such depth in analysis, song selection, and interpretation further fostered the Zone 1 *caring with* already established.

Shared Power with Non-Leaders

The Care, respect, sensitivity, and shared power amongst the leaders was also felt by student participants, as noted in the student participant interviews. The student participants interviewed felt that this concert rehearsal process was different than other

concerts, with the focus more on them as students. Both James and Harry noted feeling a sense of power during the planning and rehearsing processes, power that was shared and collaborative. I had not realized it initially, but the *caring with* form of collaboration and planning established amongst the leaders spread outward towards the other Ensemble members and beyond, something that Harry remarked upon during his interview, stating:

I think [the leaders] were able to share their power with us as Ensemble members.

And I think even the chorus, general chorus had some sort of power. I honestly did. I wouldn't say a high level, but they definitely had some sort of say.

The *caring with* had expanded, the sense of community collaboration and Care established by the leaders encompassed not only themselves, but the rest of Ensemble and potentially some of the other chorus classes as well.

Effects and Implications in the Choral Classroom

The classroom space had been transformed. Care-full, collaborative, and dialogic, the students and I were now partners. It was no longer my classroom, it was our classroom. No longer representative of a typical monologic American choral classroom, it had become a dialogic and affirming space and the result was quite beautiful. I felt similar to Steve, what the students had created, not just in the concert event but as a Caring community, exceeded anything I could have done on my own. I had learned to relinquish control and let the students, as Steve stated, “shine” in their own ways. In doing so, the old labels no longer applied, and the message of the concert changed. Even though several standard music education objectives were met, such as part-singing, tone production, stage presence, breath control, understanding of multiple vocal styles, and

solo technique, the concert was about much more than those standards. It was a school concert that was more, a concert event that functioned within the broader community. The students performed well, but the concert event was less about the musical achievement of the students and more about what they had to say. The shift in power dynamics and the over-arching environment of Care had helped foster the type of positive interconnectedness between music, personal experiences, identity, and classrooms that Smith (2019) encouraged. It was through *caring with* that we produced a concert event that fulfilled music education goals and critical pedagogy ideals.

Such findings provide an encouraging boost for music educators wishing for a more collaborative environment in their choral classrooms, counteracting some of the cynicism and fear sometimes directed towards the idea of teenage empowerment and group interactions. If a *caring with* environment is established, it is possible for students to maintain it and expand it to include others. Rather than competing *against* one another students can work *with* each other and shift their focus from self to others. Such a shift in focus provides opportunities for community impact and outreach, increased relevance and meaningfulness, and a broader educational scope.

This Zone 1 (Equitable and Relational *Caring With*) foundation was only the starting point. The students' choices and the resulting concert event would take both audience members and students around the Educational Care Spiral. A closer examination of each Zone of Care reveals how the various resulting components of this power shift worked together to create a meaningful, relevant, and empowering student-led social justice concert event. The *caring with* felt in Zone 1 helped Ensemble members inspire

other forms of Care in students and audience members. This was the first step in accomplishing their goals (which will be discussed later in this chapter), a movement towards encouraging the type of concern regarding mental health that they desired. The *caring with* expressed by the Ensemble members, especially the student leaders, encouraged other students and audience members to *care about* mental health, so I will discuss that *generalized caring about* found in Zone 2 of the ECS next.

Zone 2: Generalized *Caring About*

Zone 2, entitled “Generalized Caring About” was the least common zone mentioned in the data, which initially surprised me. However, upon further analysis, I noted two factors that contributed to the lack of data in this area. The first factor was context. As explained in earlier chapters, the private college preparatory school in which this project took place had a high-achieving environment and an expectation of service. As a result, generalized *caring about*, whether regarding educational components or service in the community, was expected and often assumed. Students would not consider it necessary to devote much time to focusing on generalized *caring about*, and the individuals interviewed would most likely not consider it necessary to mention in their responses. For the student leaders, the very act of volunteering to be a leader was a demonstration of generalized *caring about*. There was no grade component attached to leadership, and while students could choose to count leadership towards their required service hours for the school, not all leaders chose to do so. Their involvement was less about external motivators and more the result of internal motivation.

The second factor was the specialization and personalization of the project itself.

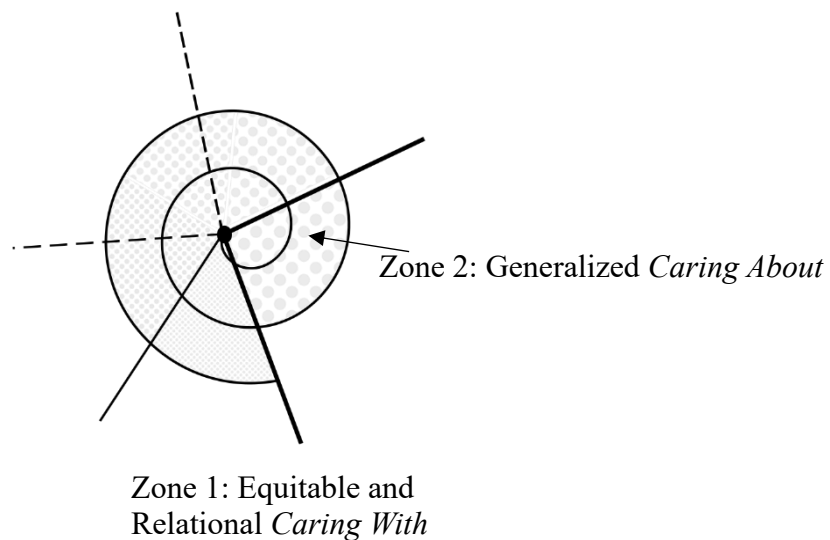
The student leaders specifically focused on meaningfulness and personalized relevance, assuming that generalized *caring about* already existed. This assumption represents one of the moments of discord between Care and CP that propelled the project forward, although in this instance such forward propulsion was done unknowingly. Upon initial examination, the student leaders appeared to contradict themselves — through their dialogue the students critically examined ways to encourage care regarding mental health while simultaneously assuming care already existed. However, when applying the ECS to the analysis, specific delineations come into focus. The students assumed that the audience members, comprised primarily of family members, friends, and Saint School faculty, already *cared for* them as individuals, so they felt the relationship was there to inspire them to *care about* mental health. It was the utilization of varying forms of Care that helped the students feel empowered to bring about change.

Such an assumption makes Zone 2 an important resting stop on the journey around the ECS. It is certainly possible that some audience members were inspired to *care about* mental health initially through the students' messages, while others began *caring about* the issues presented by the students out of obligation. However, in Zone 2, the specific motivation behind *caring about* is not as important as simply occupying space within the zone. Regardless of why they were there, by getting audience members to *care about* mental health, the leaders were laying the foundation for the caring journey yet to come. Just as teachers and students *caring with* each other in the music classroom can inspire Care and passion in others, so could the leaders encourage Care and passion in the audience and other students. Figure 9 illustrates the position of this Zone 2 data on

the ECS.

Figure 9

Zone 2 on the ECS



Zone 2 Findings in Data

Despite the aforementioned factors, there were a few instances of Zone 2 experiences in the data, and these experiences most often expressed basic awareness (one aspect of the student goals, which I will discuss later), or generalized relevance. Such relevance, while important, was not necessarily different from the relevance that might be experienced at any of my other high school choral concerts. The Zone 2 data does not reflect meaningfulness due to lack of personalization and unclear motivation.

Zone 2 Data from Concert Event Artifacts and Observations. The Depression section of the concert event began with a Zone 2 reading, the only section of the concert event to do so. I placed this reading within Zone 2 because it made audience members aware of broad facts about depression, depicting generalized relevance through

information that was connected to the topic but primarily impersonal and lacking Care. The beginning of the reading described depression as an “infinitely weighted boulder” affecting “approximately 280 million people worldwide.” The reading continued by sharing knowledge about depression in an almost clinical manner, with metaphors added for emphasis:

Points of their lives where they can't do anything because their brain feels empty. No emotion, hope, or motivation to keep up with daily life, and activities. The loss of interest applies to success and even relationships. The sinking feeling provided by this illness forces those afflicted to be uncaring, and destructive for themselves, and others. Although the main cause of depression is unknown it can be related to genetics, brain chemistry imbalances, poor nutrition, physical issues, drugs, and overall stress in daily life, and it is understood that this condition can't possibly be controlled by simple means. Those who struggle with this disorder have to constantly fight to push off the weight, and struggle although it feels like their muscles are non-existent.

The strong use of negative descriptive words suggests a strong personal connection for the leader who wrote the passage, but the lack of personal pronouns and the use of 3rd person voice encouraged Zone 2 generalized relevance or *caring about* for those listening, detached concern with little personalization.

The other Zone 2 occurrences in the concert event were found in some of the pre-performance activities. The benefit aspect of the concert event is an example of an activity whose zone was dependent on human interaction. While the students' perceptions

of the donations most likely inhabited a different zone, the parent perception of bringing donations for the community organization and the motivation behind those actions are less clear. Following the line of reasoning of the students regarding the audience members *caring for* them and therefore *caring about* the topic of the concert suggests that many audience members would have brought donations out of a sense of obligation to the students or the school, making it a Zone 2 activity. Many of the audience members bringing donations at the start of the evening had, at best, only heard about some of the student activities and reflections on mental health through conversations with their own children. While some of them may have had personal connections with the community agency or those suffering with mental health conditions, which some audience member interviews revealed, many had not been actively engaged with the issue before the concert event. Most of the audience member interviews revealed that the concert event had promoted reflection and thought regarding mental health, but that such focus on the topic had not necessarily existed prior to the event. For those audience members, bringing donations was a very general *caring about* activity that inhabited Zone 2. Some of the pre-performance PowerPoint slides were also Zone 2 material. While some slides offered specialized information and personalization, others simply offered general information about the songs, bringing basic awareness and encouraging only Zone 2 interaction.

Zone 2 Data from Rehearsal and Planning Field Notes and Observation

Notes. The educational relevance of the planning processes and activities completed by the student leadership also included Zone 2 experiences. These learning experiences were secondary to the primary focus of this research and not as specialized or personalized, but

their importance should not be underestimated. The seriousness of deadlines in the real world taught the leaders an unexpected lesson that the leaders discussed during their interviews. Amelia and Steve mentioned the difference between school deadlines where late work could be accepted and the consequences were relatively minor, and real-world deadlines where lack of adherence to a deadline meant that activities had to be altered or omitted altogether. Learning to write and read professional emails, organizing large events, making presentations, and attention to detail were also key educational benefits, noted in many of the field notes and observation notes. These generally relevant learning experiences are widely applicable and non-personalized, so I consider them Zone 2 experiences, but they were still beneficial to the students.

Zone 2 Connections with Culture and the Theoretical Groundings of CRP

Culture can be defined in various ways. Eagleton (2016) discussed the complexity of culture, offering multiple definitions:

- (1) A body of artistic and intellectual work
- (2) A process of spiritual and intellectual development
- (3) The values, customs, beliefs and symbolic practices by which men and women live
- (4) A whole way of life (p. 1)

When discussing culture and music pedagogy, it is easy to focus exclusively on the music culture of classical music (definition one) or the specific musical practices of a certain ethnic group (definition three), but when examining a student-planned concert event that promotes student voice, a more nuanced examination is warranted. In her research on

cultural competence in music education, Lee (2023) defined culture as “the knowledge, customs, beliefs, and ways of life of social groups” (p. xx). For a high school choir classroom, the way of life involves the everyday activities of learning music: rehearsing, vocalizing, critiquing, reading, and listening. As Eagleton (2016) argued, “a good deal of culture involves less what you do than how you do it” (p. 5). The prevalence of student voice and incorporation of student perspectives during the planning, rehearsing, and performance were reminiscent of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), with a focus on cultural competence and students’ cultural preferences for collaboration and beliefs regarding social justice and mental health at the forefront rather than teacher-dictated planning and prescriptive justice ideology. The power dynamic shift enabled students to maintain their own beliefs and hold dialogue with each other when conflicts arose, developing a choir culture that was organic and relevant to them personally. However, the Zone 2 (Generalized *Caring About*) experiences would be some of the least successful examples of such pedagogical practices. Although the material was representative of the students and showed general relevance, it lacked some of the depth and personalization found in other zones. Kelly-McHale (2013) and Young (2010) discussed unsuccessful implementation of CRP, attempts that lacked depth or were additive in nature. The lack of depth in these particular aspects of the concert event would fall under the same criticism; while technically representative of CRP, they were shadows of the real potential that existed. Happily, more successful implementation of CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and CSP (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017) were found in other Zones of Care.

Implications of Zone 2 in Choral Classrooms.

The impact of the Zone 2 findings provides some useful insight for music educators. As noted in the literature review within this dissertation, surface attempts at CRP and other diversity-focused pedagogies fall short of their intended goals yet such inadequate implementations are common in many US choral classrooms. The lack of interview responses regarding the Zone 2 experiences in this project appear to reinforce the lack of meaningful impact such impersonalized musical experiences have on both students and audience members. Neither students nor audience members felt personally connected to those Zone 2 experiences. However, when expanding beyond the field of music to more generally applicable educational and real-world knowledge, the relevance of Zone 2 experiences appeared to be much more important. Such importance shows that students may value learning even basic skills if they apply to both music and their non-musical educational or professional future.

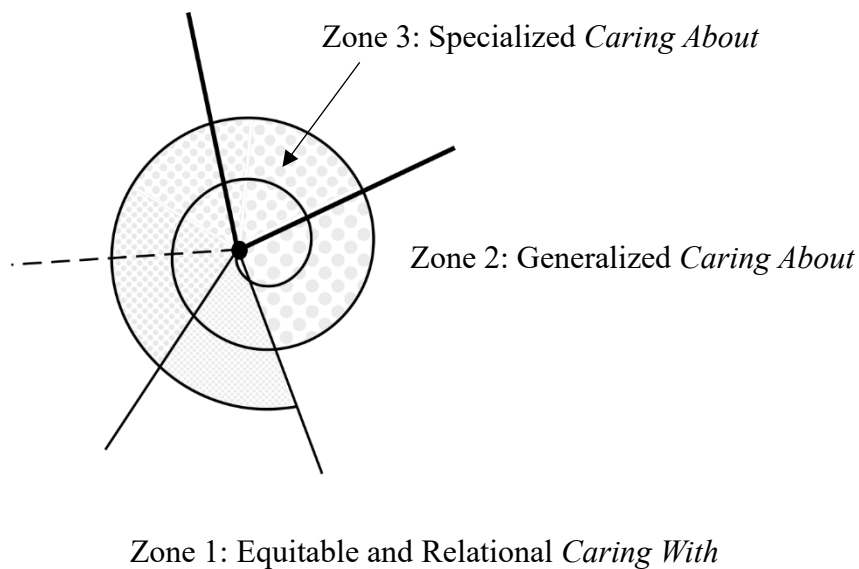
Zone 3: Specialized Caring About

This zone encompasses *caring about* that is more personalized and specialized, with focus primarily on specific groups of people and distinct issues within larger topics. I consider much of the data on relevance to be Zone 3 material. Unlike the generalized *caring about* experiences found in Zone 2, Zone 3 experiences connect with people in individualized ways. In this project, student leaders used Care when planning the concert event, in many cases specifically designing interactions that would inspire audience members and students to *care about* a mental health issue in a very specific manner, whether through building awareness of people within the community that deal with the

issue or making people aware of the reality of dealing with certain mental health conditions (both of which are student goals that will be discussed later in this chapter). This personalization made material relevant by inspiring specialized *caring about*. The discord between CP and Care present in Zone 2 is partially resolved in Zone 3. It is within this zone that *caring about* becomes intense enough to begin to inspire the type of dialogue and action needed for CP in the future. Because of its personalized manner, some Zone 3 content could also be considered meaningful, but most meaningfulness data can be found in Zones 4 and 5. Figure 10 illustrates the location of Zone 3 on the ECS. Notice how the background pattern starts to become smaller and more intense, signifying the increasing personalization and care that is present.

Figure 10

Zone 3 on the ECS



Zone 3 Findings in Data

Through my analysis, I found Zone 3 experiences in the concert event and during the planning and rehearsing processes. From the interviews, much of the relevance data, including parent relevance in the school category and student relevance, resided within this zone as well. Amongst the student goals, which I will discuss in the last section of this chapter, the bulk of the awareness data and reality data also occupied Zone 3.

Zone 3 Data from Concert Event Artifacts and Observations. Several readings encouraged Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*) experiences. The reading for the Anxiety section of the concert established personalized relevance and awareness through description and metaphor. It evoked empathy and personalized caring by depicting the reality of anxiety, but it did not promote relational care, making it a Zone 3 experience. The reading began with emotion and metaphor, then continued by relating facts about anxiety. The reading concluded with acknowledgment of the specific relevance of the topic to the school community with a statement that also reflected the student leaders' own Care regarding their teachers and peers, "We did interviews with many teachers throughout our school to understand their perspective of the mental health at our school. Most said that the number one leading issue for our students is anxiety." The reading for Burnout also encouraged Zone 3 personalized *caring about* and relevance. During the reading, the student leader offered descriptions and definitions of various aspects of burnout that were then personalized with quotes from students at the school, demonstrating specialized caring about.

Various pre-performance activities at the concert event were also Zone 3

experiences. The concert program itself, with its carefully designed titles and subsections, laid the groundwork for meaningfulness, but since the readings and song lyrics were not printed on the program, the effect of reading the program was potentially different before and after the concert. For audience members unfamiliar with the songs, the meanings behind the titles and subheadings would only become evident after the concert's completion, so studying the program pre-performance was a Zone 3 experience at best, but it potentially increased to Zone 4 after the performance.

Several of the pre-performance PowerPoint slides were also Zone 3 experiences. One example is the student-created slide for the song "Getting Older" (Eilish, 2021). On the slide, the student established personalized relevance and evoked feelings of empathy by connecting some of the lyrics of the song with real life. The slide also indirectly acknowledged the importance of the Care-full environment to which the student was accustomed. The student noted that lyrics in the song "signify the struggles of growing up and being an independent person. This foreshadows the upcoming struggle of being a college student next year, as I will be several hours away from home." The "How Are You?" interactive lobby exhibit was also primarily a Zone 3 experience. Through the "How Are You?" interactive activity, student leaders hoped to encourage audience members to be more reflective and self-aware, thereby laying the groundwork for an openness to the material that would be presented during the concert performance. The activity asked audience members to answer the question, "How are you?" on a sticky note and post it on a large window. The written responses from the exhibit demonstrated personalized reflection and specialized relevance, with many expressing sentiments that

would be mirrored during the concert performance. One individual wrote, “Stressed but happy! Glad it’s almost Friday” while another used the sticky note to admit vulnerability, “Scared, I’m not ready for adulthood to begin.” Many others expressed feelings of stress, exhaustion, or tiredness, often pairing those negative feelings with positive ones, “happy but tired and stressed” or “tired, excited, happy, anxious, hopeful, ready for spring break.” These expressions represented personalized *caring about* and relevance.

Other lobby activities could inhabit either Zone 3 or Zone 4 depending on participant perspective and motivation. The donations brought by students for the local charity demonstrated a very specialized and personalized relevance and *caring about*, but the reciprocation of that relationship was removed and filtered through the community agency, making it a complicated example of potential *caring for*, depending on the motivation and response of those involved (which are unknown). The offer of help through hotlines and printed materials after the concert was similarly situated. In both cases, the students involved had established a long-term personal connection with the material due to their reflective preparations for the concert event, but the depth of that connection and its ultimate sustainability was unknown.

Most of the songs chosen by the leaders encouraged Zone 4 experiences, but a few inhabited Zone 3 specifically because of the mental health topic they emphasized. The songs for the Depression section of the concert were examples of this phenomenon. In “What Was I Made For” (O’Connell & O’Connell, 2023), many of the lyrics emphasized the emotions attached with depression, while also using first person to personalize those emotions, potentially evoking empathy. The music also had a

melodious yet somber quality, contributing to the emotion of the words. During the concert event, the combination of lyrics and somber musical quality helped both student and audience members find relevance in the music and potential meaningfulness. The lyrics in “Young and Sad” (Cyrus, 2020) employed similar techniques, with music and words that combined to create the effect that Izzy, one of the student leaders, described as someone wanting to “live in the pain.” The lyrics, once again in first person, both evoked empathy and rejected support or expressions of that empathy, encouraging specialized *caring about* but rejecting the relational potential of *caring for*. These two songs, in their personalization and striving for meaningfulness, had the potential to push audience members and participants into Zone 4, with specialized *caring about* and the beginnings of *caring for*, but due to their intentional focus on isolation I categorize them as Zone 3 experiences.

The songs for the Anxiety section presented similar complexities, using emotional pleas, metaphors, and relatable music to establish meaningfulness and deeper relevance but still in isolation. In the song “In My Blood” (Mendes et al. 2018), the lyrics used vivid description to gain sympathy and make emotional pleas for help, but the lyrics also inferred that help does not come. It is the singer’s own inherent characteristics, not the help of others, that ultimately provide strength. The listener may want to establish relational care for the person, but that care is not implemented. The second song in the Anxiety section, “Lifeboat” (O’Keefe & Murphy, 2014), had similarly powerful yet isolating lyrics. The words provided metaphorical descriptions that promoted relevance, but not relational care; even though the singer is in a lifeboat, no one offers help or

rescue. There is no *caring for* in this song, just an emotional declaration of the crisis, making it potentially relevant and meaningful, but only in a *caring about* manner. The main meaningfulness of the final song in the Anxiety section, “Monday Monday” (Phillips, 1966/2008), came from memories associated with the music. Well known by older generations and easy to remember, the song provided a type of emotional nostalgia for many of the older audience members and a relevant connection to the students who find anxiety at the beginning of every school week. However, while the music may have provided some relational moments during the concert event, the song’s lyrics still depicted isolation.

Zone 3 Data from Rehearsal and Planning Field Notes and Observation

Notes. From the first leadership meeting held on October 24, 2023, personal, specialized *caring about* was demonstrated through the leadership’s strong concern for relevance. Even though it was early in the process, the student leaders were already talking about interviewing teachers and conducting surveys to bring awareness to mental health issues experienced in the school. Not all of these activities were approved by administration, but the brainstorming of connective and relevant ideas established the foundation for what was to come. Relevance, awareness, and reality were key components in the song selection process. The leaders’ specificity included not just the distinct mental health topics, but how those topics were presented, encouraging specialized *caring about*, or Zone 3 experiences.

Examples of such relevance and specificity appear in observation notes throughout the song selection process. For the eating disorders section, the student

leaders' discussions demonstrated how they chose pieces that represented each gender because they felt that it was important to include both perspectives. In the anxiety section, they chose "Lifeboat" (O'Keefe & Murphy, 2014), in part, because it specifically offered a teenage perspective. They found the societal pressure expressed in the song "In My Blood" (Mendes et al., 2018) to be typical of that faced by many teens, with society encouraging drinking and sex to mask their problems. Without such attention and personalized *caring about*, the more relational meaningfulness achieved at the concert would not have been attainable. The leaders' attention to Zone 3, especially during planning, provided foundation and context for the more intense and relational Zone 4 experiences.

Zone 3 Data from Interviews. During the interviews, much of the student and parent relevance expressed fell into the Zone 3 category. The students interviewed, both participants and leaders, found the concert event relevant in a very personalized manner, relating the relevance of certain concert topics and specific songs to themselves, their school, and their friends. This relevance resided firmly in Zone 3 because it related highly specialized and personal *caring about*. Amelia noted relevance with certain concert topics due to her own personal experiences, noting that she had always been "super focused in on my anxiety and depression" but she liked getting a "better understanding of everything" regarding other mental health issues, especially considering her future desire to study psychology.

For the other students interviewed, the personalization of certain topics was directly tied into specific songs. Steve found the song "Waving Through a Window"

(Pasek & Paul, 2017b) particularly relevant in a very personal manner. For him, the song encouraged people to *care about* something he had experienced, indirectly also encouraging them to *care about* him. James expressed similarly strong connections between high school and the song “Anonymous Ones” (Pasek et al., 2021). Once again, the direct relevance of the song’s content encouraged listeners to *care about* a specific mental health topic and the students who dealt with such issues. Such specialized and personal experiences demonstrate a strong connective Zone 3 interaction with the concert material.

Through the process of assuming and implementing leadership, the student leaders found additional personal relevance and *caring about* that related to their education and future. Although this relevance was more long-term, it was still just a Zone 3 experience, very specialized and personal *caring about* that was not necessarily relational. Both of the leaders interviewed expressed pride in having taken on so much leadership responsibility and felt that such experience would help them in the future. Their comments related personal impact, making them Zone 3 *caring about* instead of simple generalized *caring about*.

Zone 3 Connections with the Theoretical Groundings of CRP and CSP

Many of the experiences in the Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*) category illustrate more effective implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017). By focusing the entire concert on a student-chosen theme, providing the student leaders with time for discussion and reflection as they selected the repertoire, and

including student reflections in the concert itself, I was able to at least partially avoid some of the pitfalls of additive and surface level CRP and CSP attempts and better produce some of the sustaining depth that was needed. Through the use of Care and student empowerment, students had a more open platform for storytelling that potentially gave them an option of sharing but avoided exploiting their stories for personal or organizational gain, hopefully averting many of the potential problems mentioned by Hess (2021).

Implications of Zone 3 in Choral Classrooms.

The Zone 3 findings from this research suggest that increasing student voice in a Care-filled environment can have positive effects on student-perceived relevance. This increased relevance is due, in part, to the students' abilities to establish their own connections with the music being learned. By removing some of the more prescriptive elements in choral teaching and replacing them with discussion and exploration, the students have more space to share their own knowledge and perspectives, ultimately finding and, in some cases creating, their own relevance with the music, themselves, and their communities. Through their music study, they learn to personally *care about* certain issues as they relate to each other and those around them. Such *caring about* can build a more positive classroom environment and increase intrinsic motivation.

Zone 4: Caring About and Caring For Intermingling

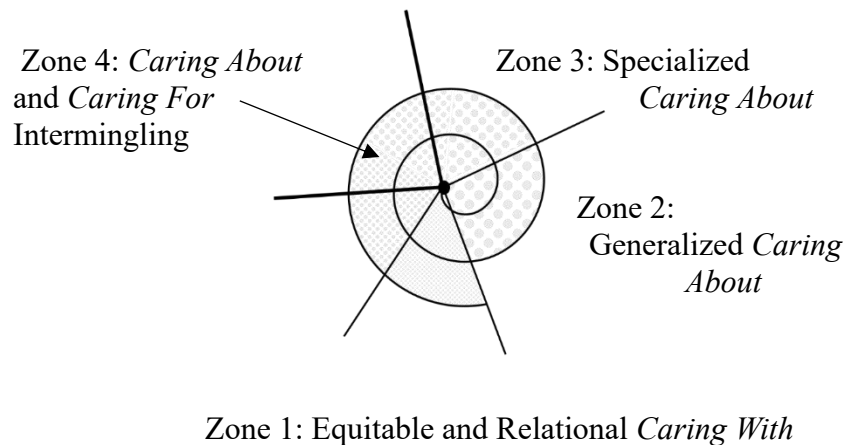
I define Zone 4 interactions as intense, specialized and personalized *caring about* experiences that are more emotional and sometimes relational, leading to some potential *caring for* moments. During these moments, the attempt at *caring for* is made, but the

relational aspect is not fully established by all parties. Although some reciprocation does exist, it is inconsistent, so the requirements of *caring for*, as noted by Noddings (2001, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2017) cannot be fully established. Instead, the interactions seem to waiver between *caring about* and *caring for*, at times one-sided and at other times relational. Data for meaningfulness and relevance are both located within this zone.

Figure 11 depicts the location of Zone 4 on the ECS. Note the change in the background dots. The merging of patterned dot sizes and spacing in the background indicates the presence of *caring about* that merges into *caring for*. Such merging of the two types of Care once again creates discord when examined through the lens of CP, with an unequal power dynamic and actions that could be helpful to some and harmful to others. In some instances, such Care encourages people to provide others with much-needed help and understanding. At other times, such actions involve assumptions that do more harm than good. It is hoped that Zone 4 is just a resting point for those traveling through the ECS spiral, a temporary checkpoint before embracing more nuanced and complex forms of Care. Zone 4 data was widespread, appearing to be an important aspect of the student and audience interactions. I found the prevalence of such data indicative of the increased meaningfulness and relevance encouraged by various aspects of the rehearsals, planning processes, and concert event experiences.

Figure 11

Zone 4 on the ECS



Zone 4 Findings in Data

I placed several aspects of the concert event into this category, including some of the songs, readings, and slides. Data from interviews reinforced such an analysis. Much of the meaningfulness and relevance expressed in the interviews was Zone 4 (*Caring About and Caring For Intermingling*) material due to its intense personal connection and repeated but un-sustained attempts at *caring for*, including the relevance expressed by the faculty and administration, the personal relevance expressed by parents, the personal meaningfulness expressed by parents, and the personal meaningfulness expressed by students. There were less data from the observation notes and field notes for this zone, in part due to the natural communication tendencies of teenagers. However, Zone 4 considerations were likely present internally as students made decisions regarding concert material, demonstrated through the concert content. In addition, some aspects of the student goals, including acceptance and help or support could also be considered Zone 4.

Zone 4 Data in the Concert Event Artifacts. In the concert event, some of the songs were both meaningful and relevant in a manner that expressed one side of a

relationship, with reciprocation unknown, but potentially encouraging co-constructed meanings that represented a *caring for* relationship. In “This Is Me Trying” (Swift, 2020b), the lyrics read like a conversation or letter to someone close. The attempt at *caring for* was there, but it is up to the other party whether or not to accept it. The popularity of the song and its upbeat style could potentially have made people more receptive to its message, making it naturally more relational for the younger generation who regularly listen to it and promoting more *caring for* interactions between performer and listener or among performers through their interpretations and performance purposes.

The song “Old Man” (Bryan, 2020) had a similar impact, but more focused on the older generations in the audience. The lyrics of the song sounded like a letter, similar to those in Swift’s (2020b) “This Is Me Trying,” but more emotional and personal. In some ways, the lyrics acknowledged the existence of a long-term *caring for* relationship by one of the parties involved and potentially offered at least a thank you for such a relationship. Within the audience, parents may have been more affected by the lyrics, especially if they felt that their son or daughter was singing them with the intention of appreciation and reciprocity of Care. The acknowledgement of the sacrifices and relationship in these lyrics made this a strong Zone 4 song, with the potential to even lead into Zone 5 if both listener and singer approached it with purpose and openness.

There were two readings during the concert that also fell into this category, both at climactic points in the concert. In the midpoint section, “Bringing Light Into the Darkness,” the reading was personalized and relational, striving for meaningfulness through a sense of importance, personal engagement and investment, and emotional

intensity. In the reading, which he both wrote and delivered, Steve reached out to the audience, striving to encompass them in relational care. He finished the reading with an open statement about community and faith, one that reflected his own perceptions regarding the Care that he had received and hoped to offer others:

I hope that as a community, we reflect the love and support that Christ offered His disciples to you, and I hope that through this concert, you will gain faith that you are not alone, hope that things will get better, and realize that each and every one of you is so deeply loved.

Steve was promoting meaningfulness with personalized emotional engagement and emotional intensity, offering *caring for* if the listeners were willing to accept it. Some members of the audience acknowledged receipt of that *caring for* through heartfelt applause or comments after the concert was over.

The reading in the final section of the concert, “Keeping the Light Shining,” similarly strove to establish at least short-term *caring for*. In the reading, Steve stated, “These last three songs are meant to lift you up and give you the strength to persevere through the more challenging times.” Once again, Steve seemed to be trying to draw in the listeners through his expression of *caring for* them, demonstrating meaningfulness by stressing importance, and offering personal investment and engagement. Interview data suggested that some audience members did accept and acknowledge that Care, so temporary *caring for* was achieved to a certain extent, solidifying the place of this data in Zone 4.

Some of the non-performance concert event activities could also be considered

Zone 4. A few of the pre-performance slides contained Zone 4 content. The best example of this is one of the slides for the song “Waving Through a Window” (Pasek & Paul, 2017b). The student who created the slide seemed to be trying to reach out through his writing by establishing personalized relevance but also offering one side of relational care, “While it has gotten easier to deal with over time, anxiety and loneliness are issues I still face on a daily basis, but we must try to remember that we are not alone and that there is always someone waving back at you.” The student reached out in a *caring for* manner through his words, but it was up to the audience whether or not to accept that Care. As mentioned earlier, considering the time spent with the content and community agency, the donations to the community agency brought by the students could also be considered Zone 4 since they could potentially demonstrate specialized *caring about* and *caring for*. However, that is dependent on internal student motivation and potential reciprocation by the *cared for*, which are unknown data.

Zone 4 Data from Interviews. Interview data revealed numerous Zone 4 connections from the concert event. The parents who experienced personal connective meaningfulness usually felt it as a strong emotional connection, or they experienced powerful personal engagement with song lyrics or a concert reading. These Zone 4 experiences were emotionally intense, personalized, and relational, with interviewees sharing that they felt as if aspects of the student performance had reached out and touched them. Kathy found the song “Pretty Isn’t Pretty” (Rodrigo, 2023) personally meaningful because of her own experiences, and during that song the night of the concert event, a connective relationship was established between her and the students. However,

that relationship had very little potential for long-term consistency and reciprocity, rather it was a temporary connective *caring for* relational moment. Jenny shared that she felt the entire experience was different from other concerts, stating that she “felt really emotional....throughout the different segments [of the concert].” This emotion had a strong impact but only the connections with her daughter and her daughter’s close friends, whom Jenny knew well, persisted long-term.

For the faculty and administration, teaching was such a central part of their lives and their concern for their students was so all-encompassing (a common trait amongst the highly dedicated faculty at the school), that school relevance was also personal relevance that held extra meaning, a Zone 4 experience. Sally specifically expressed relevance regarding burnout and anxiety and expressed hope that the concert would help her understand her students better. Father John also mentioned the relevance of specific topics to our students and his personal concern for them. For him, the relevance to the students was tied in with personal relevance and meaning, in this case expressed through concern. This transformed relevance experienced by faculty and administration showed relational *caring for* directed to the students they mentor.

Some students interviewed relayed intensely meaningful and personal connections to some of the songs, relating to the music and viewing their performance of it as a way of hopefully being heard and understood. These intense but one-sided expressions that sent relational aspirations out toward known and unknown listeners could be classified as Zone 4 experiences. Steve’s increased personal meaningfulness with the songs he arranged carried over to the other Ensemble members, leading to discussions that led to

co-constructed meaning-making. Those constructed and personalized meanings were shared with audience members through the performance, sending out caring connections to listeners.

James expressed personal meaningfulness with some of the songs due to his connection with the lyrics, a connection that also acknowledged receipt of Care, “it was the lyrics . . . kind of helped me . . . hearing those lyrics and knowing what I felt, especially as an underclassman, what I’ve been through, um, it almost made me feel better about it.” Such increased meaningfulness led to increased emotional intensity during the concert performance, “there’s a big difference between singing with emotion and singing without emotion, I think that concert is kind of trying to be . . . in the moment with the song vs. just like singing the song.” It was that emotional connection publicly expressed through performance, putting it out there for others to experience, that made those meaningful experiences relational, turning it from a regular concert into a Caring outreach. James also made an interesting observation when comparing the meaningfulness of this concert to one of our previous concerts, one that indirectly expressed his perception of relational Care, “I definitely liked the songs in the [March] concert, probably not as much as the October one [a previous concert] but I also got more out of singing them I think.” This interesting expression of duality made an important distinction between enjoyment and meaningfulness, one that I would not have anticipated from a teenager. For James, he had found some of the previous concert music more fun to sing, but those experiences simply had not been as meaningful as this concert experience. His feelings of fulfillment from this concert partially reflect the Care he both received

and sent out to others through the lyric analysis, song interpretation, and meaningful connections. These Zone 4 experiences made more of an impact, one that the more surface level interactions with music from previous concerts lacked.

Zone 4 Data from Field Notes and Observation Notes. During the planning processes, attention to the student goal of acceptance, which I will discuss in more detail later, could be considered Zone 4 since acceptance naturally involves *caring about*, *caring for*, and knowledge of self and otherness. There were also a few discussions during leadership meetings that demonstrated the beginnings of *caring for* relationships aimed at those outside of the group. The leadership meeting on November 15, 2023 showed a shift from a focus on relevance towards a sensitivity to meaningfulness during a discussion about the self-harm section of the concert. The leaders had been discussing the need for statistical data in the concert to help the audience understand the widespread occurrence of mental health issues, especially among teenagers, but when the topic of self-harm came up, the leaders shifted their focus. Due to the seriousness and importance of the topic, the leaders turned to *caring for* rather than *caring about*. That care towards audience members and other performers was not yet reciprocated, but the relational intent was there, as was the emotional intensity, making it a Zone 4 experience.

Other Zone 4 planning experiences revolved around class discussions. The leaders demonstrated the meaningfulness of all the concert topics when they presented the topics to the rest of the Ensemble members, showing both importance and sensitivity when they discussed the different mental health topics. Amelia and Steve emphasized the importance of Ensemble being a safe space, something I regularly tried to establish in

class as their teacher. This established the standard by which Ensemble as a whole would approach concert discussions. As we began learning each of the concert songs in class, leadership members would take turns presenting the songs to the rest of the Ensemble members, discussing the lyrics and their reasoning behind each song's inclusion in the concert.

These presentations would often lead to brief but powerful discussions over particular lyrics in the song and their potential impact on listeners. As the students *cared with* each other in their discussions, they worked to *care for* their fellow performers and future audience members through their interpretations of the music they chose and rehearsed. The field notes from February 8, 2024 offer an example of this. The class was discussing the difference in meaning between the songs “Rescue” (Daigle, 2020) and “Keep Holding On” (Lavigne & Gottwald, 2009):

The boys brought up the fact that “Rescue” was more about reaching out a helping hand and holding somebody up or pulling someone to safety. Whereas “Keep Holding On” was more about empowerment (yes, the kids used that word) and encouraging people to hold on and help themselves. We then discussed how both forms of action were helpful and needed.

As well as understanding, the students demonstrated a sense of emotional and personal investment into the meaning of the songs and how they might be received by audience members. As the students discussed the importance of both offering a helping hand and encouraging empowerment, they made a definite switch towards relational Care, even though that Care was not yet reciprocated they recognized its potential to touch lives

during the concert through those songs.

Zone 4 Connections with the Theoretical Groundings and Pedagogical Underpinnings of CRP, CSP, and Dialogue

The Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling) experiences in classroom discussions and those relayed through the interviews demonstrate the result of deeper CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995), CSP (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017) and dialogue. The depth of the dialogue as students wrestled with varying interpretations of music and their applicability, the meaningfulness of the content to the students, and its relevance to their lives show that these students were engaged in the music personally. The music also represented them culturally when applying Eagleton's (2016) broad and varied definitions of culture. As they interpreted the various songs and connected their meanings to their own lives, the students also took part in co-construction of meaning (Spruce, 2015) and dialogic listening (Bylica, 2023). Through such practices, they increased their understanding of music along with their own identities and how they interacted with the world around them, an approach to embracing the interconnectedness of music and identity similar to that mentioned by Smith (2019), but with increased emphasis on meaning analysis and planning, and less emphasis on musicking.

The meaningfulness and relevance of the concert event expressed during the interviews also demonstrated an important element of CRP: connection between school and home or community. Ladson-Billings (1995) expressed concern over the lack of continuity between school experiences and home or community experiences. While many music educators have been primarily concerned with addressing aspects of musical style

and music-making to increase that school-to-home continuity, choral educators also have the option of addressing those continuity concerns through lyrics. I feel that these interviews demonstrated the importance of that idea by showing the impact attention to lyrics can have on the school-to-home connection. Regelski (2006) expressed his concern regarding the lack of relevance of school music and its isolation from the real world. The interviews validated that this concert and teaching method bridged that gap, increasing the relevance for those performing and for those in the audience as well. This placed the concert event in a more meaningful and connected position within the community as a whole. Many students also put the concert repertoire on their personal playlists, suggesting that sustained meaning-making with the music could continue in the future, providing more long-term sustainability as encouraged by CSP.

Implications of Zone 4 in Choral Classrooms.

The Zone 4 data from this research emphasizes the strong and meaningful impact felt by students and audience members when *caring about* and *caring for* is an authentic part of the music selection, learning, and performance processes. Although the classroom discussions and time required for students to engage in meaning-making can take up coveted rehearsal time, the impact of such activities should not be underestimated. In this research, students appeared to feel more connected to the music, as did audience members. These connections led to increased reflection, emotional connection, and engagement, all of which impacted the rehearsal process and the final performance. When students *care about* issues in their community and *care for* each other through their music, there is a strong potential for increased intrinsic motivation, which can lead to a

more positive rehearsal environment and a more impactful performance — the sacrifice of rehearsal time does not lead to a sacrifice in music standards but rather a shift in perspective that can potentially increase the overall quality of the experience.

Zone 5: Stable *Caring For*

In Zone 5, all parties are fully emotionally engaged, and all Care is relational and reciprocated. Zone 5 interactions are stable, ideally over longer periods of time. While this study took place over an eight-month period, the concert event was a one-night event. Therefore, determining stable relational *caring for* is rather difficult. Rather than creating and building newer relational Care as in the previous zone, the evidence from the project that potentially demonstrates Zone 5 Care primarily deals with intensified connections in relationships that already exist. There were deeply meaningful experiences felt by students and audience members precisely because the content resonated within an already existing *carer-caring for* relationship, showing the potential of the project to add connection and understanding to existing relationships in a meaningful way.

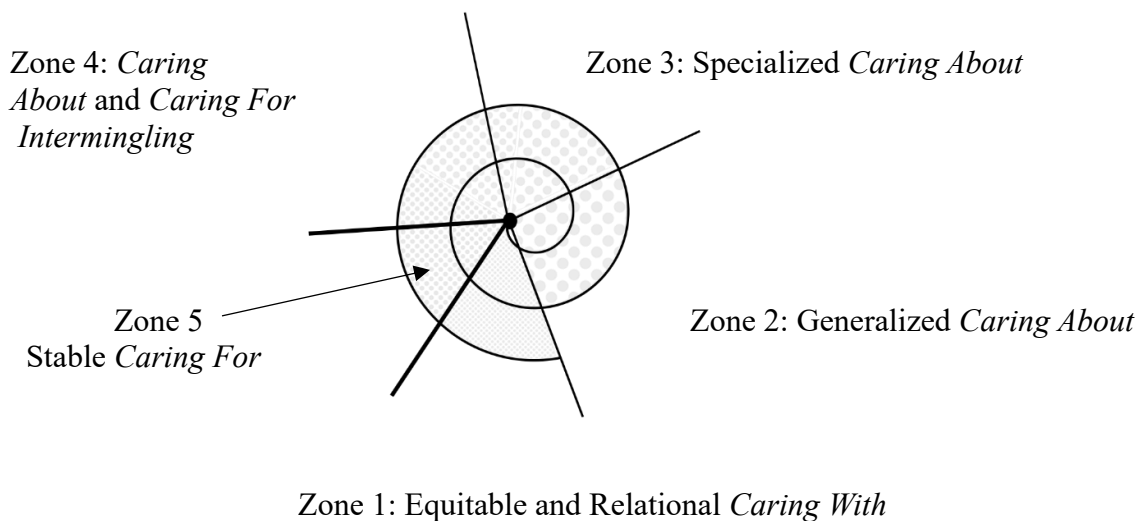
Zone 5 experiences interacted with CP ideas in a complex manner. The nature of Zone 5 *caring for* implies a power dynamic, which could negatively affect CP due to the potential for inhibited dialogue and rescuing. However, applying the ECS to an educational project that promotes student voice has a different effect on the interactions within the power dynamic inherent in *caring for*. As noted above, the Zone 5 interactions in this project were the result of the concert event intensifying already existing relationships, often between parent and child or faculty and student. Normally, the adult would function as the carer in such a relationship, with the youth acknowledging receipt

of that care as the cared-for individual. This project added additional layers to that interaction, making it more fluid and responsive. That parent-child or teacher-student relationship still existed, but through this project, the youth entered into dialogue with the adult through the meanings and messages portrayed during the concert event. The youth, actively working to free themselves from the preconceived images and ideals expected of them relating to mental health, acted in a Care-filled manner that acknowledged the Care received and then sent that Care back out in a way that shifted the power dynamic. Rather than reinscribing the existing power dynamic, the students were re-defining it; the power dynamic still existed but with new and more fluid boundaries.

Figure 12 presents the location of Zone 5 on the ECS, showing a small and intense background pattern to represent the more closely connective tissues of *caring for* relationships.

Figure 12

Zone 5 on the ECS



Zone 5 Data from Interviews

During the interviews, some of the meaningfulness expressed by faculty, administration, and parents in connection with their children or students could be classified as Zone 5. The interviewees described interactions that were brought on by the concert event but demonstrated *caring for* and acknowledgment of that care within an already existing Caring relationship. Some parents found the concert event personally meaningful specifically because of the importance it had for their child and the other students that they knew. Jenny's already established connection with her daughter and her daughter's friends made her personal meaningfulness stronger because she felt and understood what they expressed from a more personal and knowing perspective. She already *cared for* these students, they expressed a feeling and need through their singing, and she responded back as a listener — a Zone 5 experience on the ECS. That strong Care and connection also resulted in a longer impact for Jenny, who commented in her interview about the longevity of the effects of the concert.

In one case, the Zone 5 interactions from the concert event had positive and negative repercussions for an already existing relationship. Anna expressed meaningfulness connected to her relationship with the students she knew, noting the increased impact of the emotion and meaning behind the lyrics. Her words expressed a strong *caring for* connection:

some of [the students] really had some good emotion that you could see in their faces when they were singing . . . and . . . you see it you can hear the lyrics, you can feel it, right, the emotion of the song and the music just kind of hits you.

She went on to comment on her new appreciation for two songs that she had previously listened to with her daughter, illustrating more positive Caring encounters. Although she regularly heard her daughter sing along with “What Was I Made For” (O’Connell & O’Connell, 2023) and “This Is Me Trying” (Swift, 2020b), she had never really taken time to examine the lyrics. This concert encouraged her to listen more closely, creating new meaningful connective points between she and her daughter. However, there was one song that actually caused a small rift in the mother-daughter relationship, an instance where the message and plea sent out by her daughter and the other young ladies was not received in a Caring manner. Anna did not personally connect with the song “Pretty Isn’t Pretty” (Rodrigo, 2023), nor did she understand the personal meaning of the lyrics and music as portrayed during the concert event. This lack of acknowledgment of value and meaning upset her daughter, “my daughter was so upset ‘cause I guess that’s one that she really liked and I didn’t.” Anna did not realize the importance of the piece to her daughter, which potentially brought to light a misunderstanding between the two of them on some deeper issues. From her daughter’s viewpoint, it was an unacknowledged plea in their *caring for* relationship. Anna’s experiences, both positive and negative, point out the relational nature of the meaningfulness she experienced.

For Matthew, his *care for* his child and the other students he taught made the experience meaningful despite his lack of personal connection with the music. His son’s role as one of the student leaders also made the experience meaningful for him. Matthew spoke of his conversations with his son after the concert, “he took a ton of pride in this...doing and taking something from the initial idea or concept and taking it all the

way through to its completion.” His *care for* his son provided extra meaning to the experience, as did his *care for* his students. Matthew noted how the students were more engaged, which increased his own meaningfulness. Matthew did not express a high degree of emotion during his interview, but his meaningful experiences were still important. For him, the concert created a proud father-son moment and added a new meaningful component between himself and the students he taught. This relational nature between teacher and students was evident in the other faculty interviews as well.

As with Matthew, the other faculty members found the concert event meaningful in part because of their already established relationships with their students. Sally commented that during some of the songs, she felt connections with specific students due to her prior knowledge of them, showing the strong Care she had *for* her students and her receipt of their Caring messages during the performance, “you know it’s like that fits what I know they’re going through or with what they’re passionate about, or maybe them standing up for a friend or a peer that might be in that situation.” She already *cared for* those students, and this concert furthered that relationship, with the students using music to continue the conversations they had already established, making it a Zone 5 experience.

Father John also found the concert experience connective, but for him it was more of the start of a conversation rather than a continuation. He found the music the students chose to be the beginning of a dialogue in which he had not previously been much engaged. He had an already existing Care-filled relationship with many of the students, but mental health topics had not been brought up in their conversations. For him, this

concert event provided a potential avenue for a new form of *caring for* in those relationships. The students had reached out through this concert event and he was willing to listen, ready to acknowledge this new aspect in their Caring interactions. Being an Augustinian priest, much of his life revolves around community and service, so even his own personal connections with the concert material were relational, always looking outward as a shepherd towards the world around him, but he was not restricted to such power dynamics. The impact and meaningfulness he experienced from the concert event was wrapped up in his ongoing relational *care for* all those he takes care of everyday, but it also encouraged him to personally reflect and expand his views; he was both giving and receiving Care.

Some of the meaningful experiences felt by the students were also deeply connective and more obviously relational in nature, often discovering a new *caring for* potential in the midst of *caring with* dialogue. Amelia pointed out that studying the lyrics increased her meaningfulness, in part, because it helped her understand her peers better. The students then carried that understanding outward towards others. Through *caring with* each other, she and the other students also gained new understandings that encouraged them to potentially *care for* others with shared experiences, propelling them around the Educational Care Spiral. For Steve, it was his relationship with the other students that actually increased the meaningfulness of some of the music for him, which he then passed on through his performance, adding new layers of meaning and emotion that otherwise would not have been present for him personally.

For some students, the concert event rehearsing and performance increased

connectiveness not just with the other students but with specific adults as well. Harry found that the song “Old Man” (Bryan, 2020) had an impact on his relationship with his dad, specifically commenting on the shift in perspective from being the *cared-for* to being the *carer* whenever he sang the song, “I always put myself in my dad’s shoes.” Such a shift in perspective presented a new opportunity for Harry to acknowledge the Care he had received from his dad and then switch roles and *care for* his dad through his interactions with him after the performance.

These Zone 5 experiences demonstrate some of the deepest personalized impacts of the project, experiences that were connective for individuals on a very personal and meaningful level. They epitomize relational *caring for*, showing both acceptance and support that is reciprocated and stable. The experiences also demonstrate the growth and sharing of identities through music, identity acknowledgement and connection that carried over to the audience members, who grew in their own relationships and identities through music as well. The Caring dialogue that had begun in the classroom extended out to include friends and family in the audience as Care was offered and acknowledged — a form of audience participation that proved to be meaningful for many of those involved.

Zone 5 Connections with the Theoretical Groundings of CRP and CSP

The Zone 5 (Stable *Caring For*) experiences represented deep and complex results of student empowerment, dialogue, and a focus on relevance and meaning that aligns with many of the goals of CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and CSP (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017). By incorporating student culture and views in a sustained and Care-filled manner, the music spoke to both performers and audience

members as an integral part of their lives, deepening many existing connections and creating new ones as well. Rather than a school experience isolated from the community, the school and community became one connective group, and both old and new experiences and relationships were mixed together to create a living and evolving tradition.

Implications of Zone 5 in Choral Classrooms.

The Zone 5 data from this research emphasizes the deep and lasting impact music can have on existing relationships if a Care-filled interpretive space is provided and dialogue with and about the music occurs. By removing some of the rigidity commonly found in choral classrooms, students were able to present their voice through the music instead of their teacher's interpretation of that music, and the resulting positive effects went far beyond the classroom walls and performance stage. The performance was more than just the culmination of well-planned rehearsals and hard-working students, it was a form of communication and connection between Caring people. Such an impact builds support for the existing choral programs, increasing their meaningfulness and relevance within the community. It also has the potential to positively affect the classroom environment and future learning.

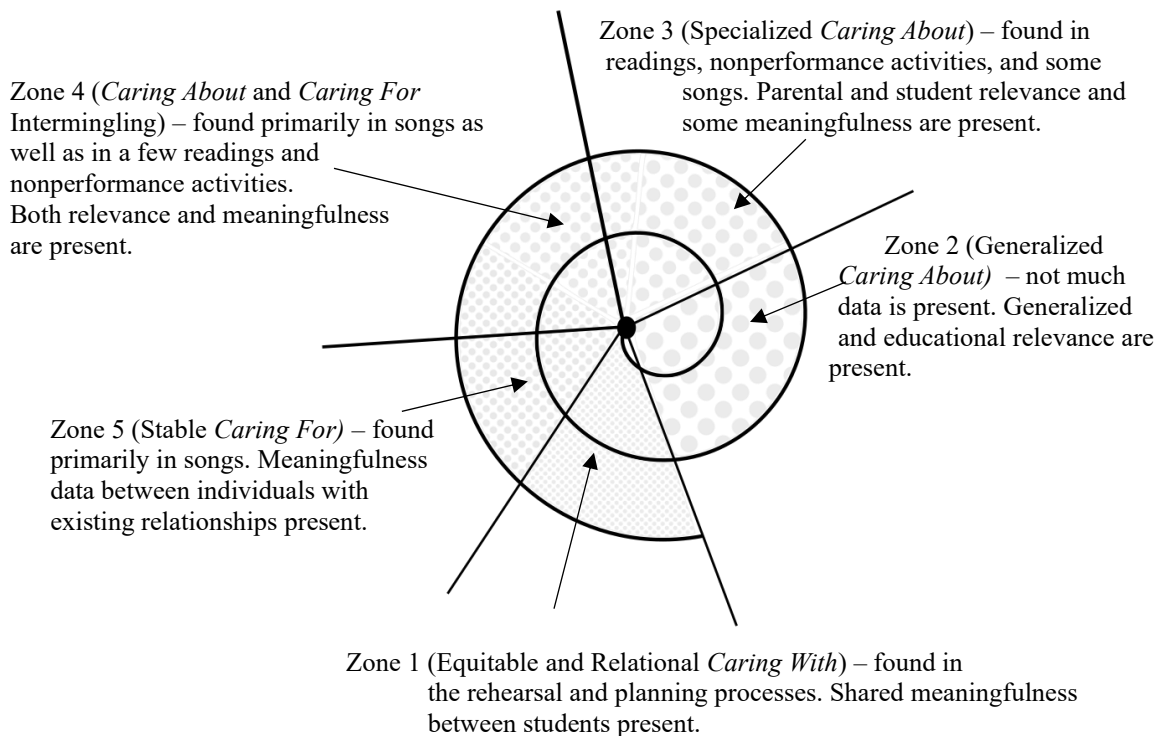
Broad View of Meaningfulness and Relevance Data on the ECS

Having now progressed around the Educational Care Spiral with the meaningfulness and relevance data, the presence of such data in the various zones on the spiral becomes evident. By grounding the project in *caring with* in Zone 1, the student leaders provided varying levels of *caring about* and *caring for* expressed through

relevance and meaningfulness. These forms of Care and the resulting relevance and meaningfulness applied to various parties: the student leaders, the student participants, and the audience members. Figure 13 depicts a summary of the location of relevance and meaningfulness data on the ECS. Only data from student interactions with each other and with me are found in Zone 1, primarily from the planning and rehearsing processes. Most of the relevance data, whether from the planning and rehearsing processes or concert event, are located in Zones 2–4, and most of the meaningfulness data are located in Zones 3–5.

Figure 13

Meaningfulness and Relevance on the ECS



Now that the meaningfulness and relevance data have been placed within the Educational Care Spiral, I want to turn to the collective narrative told by the students, encouraged by dialogue and founded upon the student leaders' goals.

Student Goals and the Collective Narrative

A result of the dialogic teaching rooted in Care was the empowerment of student voice. A necessary component of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), such empowerment was crucial to the success of the project. The first major step in asserting and developing that student voice occurred when the student leaders established their goals for the concert. They set their goals early in the process and kept them in mind throughout the concert planning, so their presence permeates much of the data.

This goal setting was also the beginning of the students' storytelling process. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) emphasized the importance of storytelling and counterstorytelling, asserting that an individual's experiential knowledge has value and worth; this concert planning provided the student leaders with an opportunity to potentially tell their own stories through music. They had the power to determine what they wanted to say and how they wanted to say it. Allsup (2010) discussed the importance of repertoire representing living traditions, traditions significant and relevant to the modern day. This project provided a unique opportunity to embrace that idea, examining current traditions and potentially creating new ones. Through their discussions, the students participated in dialogic listening (Bylica, 2023) and textual analysis of lyrics, thereby co-constructing musical meanings (Spruce, 2015) which they ultimately used to create a collective narrative about their realities and concerns regarding mental health.

The student leaders also unknowingly embraced the idea of participatory parity (Fraser, 2009), emphasizing the full participation and acceptance of those experiencing mental health issues. Rather than expecting people experiencing mental health issues to hide in the shadows pretending to be the same as everyone else, the student leaders wanted open understanding and acceptance. Within their high-achieving school environment, they were demanding not just tolerance, but full interaction and equality, an acknowledgement that success could look different from the idealized perfection expected by many of the parents. In doing so, they created a social justice concert event that told a collective narrative about mental health and fulfilled the “five potential frames of activity” described by de Quadros (2019, p. 35): the choir demographics were diverse for the school in their inclusion of mental health demographics (through self-identification), the programming of the concert was centered around activism (as seen through the student goals), the Ensemble students volunteered at a community organization that served marginalized populations (including those experiencing mental health issues), the students turned the concert into a sort of gathering that embraced the entire school community by making the concert centralized around the mental health idea (transforming the product itself from a school concert to something community focused), and the students worked specifically with a non-profit organization that serves marginalized populations by making it a benefit concert and providing resources to help individuals contact that organization if needed.

The students fulfilled those social justice requirements, in part, through their goals. Although the students did not know my research questions at the time, they set

goals for the concert that were closely connected to my research, making them an essential part of my data analysis. As I began to analyze these goals, I discovered that they fell into four main categories, with several subcategories interwoven throughout the data. Some subcategories included both positive and negative connotations. Table 21 illustrates these goals and categories.

Table 21

Student Goals for the Concert

Awareness	Reality	Help/Support	Acceptance
Emotional awareness of mental health feelings and conditions	Effects of mental health issues on the individual experiencing them	Admitting that you need help, it's ok if you want help	Acceptance without assumptions
Medical/Scientific awareness of mental health conditions	Effects of mental health issues on others, including friends, family, and other relationships	Where you can get help, what resources are available	Acknowledgement of societal pressure and its impact on mental health
Self-awareness of views on mental health and personal experiences in dealing with mental health issues		Offering help and support to others suffering with mental health issues	
		Call-to-action, persuading others to become involved and help those dealing with mental health issues	

The goals are closely connected to meaningfulness and relevance. Awareness is centered primarily on laying the foundation for relevance and meaningfulness. Reality, on the other hand, is firmly rooted in relevance, pointing out the significance of mental health in the community. Acceptance encompasses both relevance and meaningfulness in that it

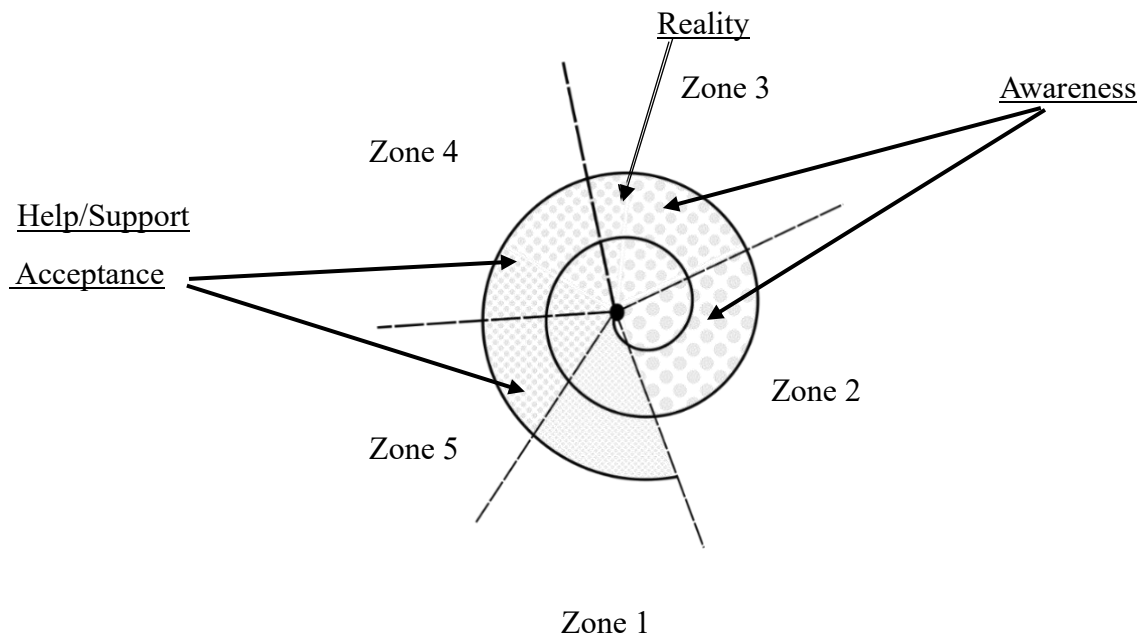
asks audience members to not only consider the information relevant but to find it important and personal enough to *care for* someone experiencing those issues. Offering or seeking help or support also acknowledges both relevance and meaningfulness in that one has to accept the relevance of a mental health condition and then consider it personal and important enough to either ask for help or offer help to others. Examining these connections is helpful, but the full scope of the students' aims become much clearer when the goals are analyzed in terms of the ECS.

Although they may not have realized it at the time, the student leaders were ultimately making the concert event about Care. Their Zone 1 interactions were focused on taking others from Zone 2 through Zone 5. They drew listeners and participants on this journey incrementally. First confronting scientific and anecdotal information concerning mental health issues, then learning about the people experiencing such issues (with particular focus on people they knew), and, finally, embracing the idea of relationally connecting with others in a Care-filled manner regarding mental health.

Examining the data, I was able to follow the journey outlined by the student leaders, locating the leaders' goals of connection with others within the ECS. I will first provide an overview here, as outlined in Figure 14, then walk through more specifics of the story in the following subsections.

Figure 14

Locating the Student Leaders' Goals on the ECS



The goal of Awareness was Zone 2 (Generalized *Caring About*) or Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*); the students appeared to be primarily concerned with getting others to *care about* mental health conditions, sometimes generally (the existence of mental health conditions) and sometimes specialized (mental health issues relevant to the students, school, or local community). Reality, on the other hand, was firmly in Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*). The students wanted others to understand the reality of dealing with mental health conditions as related to specific individuals or groups, making it very specialized and personal *caring about*. The other two categories, Help/Support and Acceptance, existed in Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling) and Zone 5 (Stable *Caring For*), depending on whether the relational aspect of *caring for* was sustained and reciprocated. To accept someone without assumptions, you must both be

aware of them and understand their reality, then be willing to enter into a relationship of sorts in which you knowingly accept them for who they are and all that entails. The act of such honest acceptance is an act of *caring for*, but it is up to the other individual to acknowledge that acceptance. Offering or accepting help or support is a much more direct *caring for* relationship. The offer of help is the act of *caring for*, the acceptance of such help is the reciprocation — the students acknowledged both sides through their music selections and lobby activities.

The Students' Collective Narrative

When the student goals and Care are connected to the messages of the concert material (songs, readings, and artifacts), a story emerges, one that was part of the students' journey towards freeing themselves from mental health stigma and unrealistic expectations. They were using the concert to tell their story, to feel heard and seen, and to demand recognition and respect. Embracing Care, they deepened their understanding of certain songs and gained more knowledge and empathy regarding mental health, then used the music to express those new meanings and understandings. Through that expression, they reached out a hand in care, singing about vulnerabilities they may have been too scared to say in conversation, even though those truths were part of their daily existence. The entire concert event was used to tell that story, and there were other performers and audience members who responded back, acknowledging and accepting the story they told.

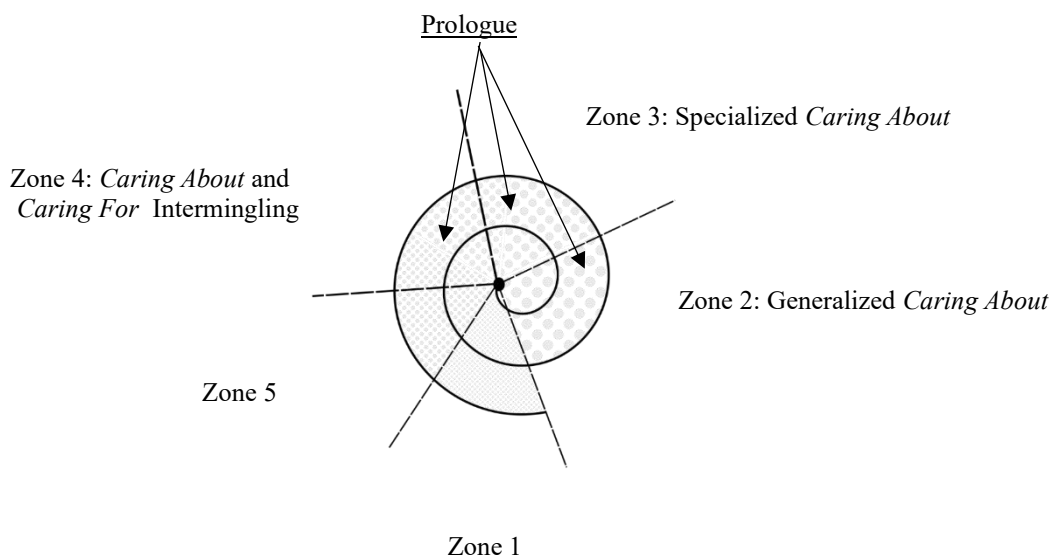
The Prologue. The story began in the lobby before the performance. The Ensemble students were present in the lobby to welcome audience members into the

space, personally inviting them to be a part of their story. The various interactive lobby activities helped establish setting and context. Asking audience members to reflect on what made them happy and how they were feeling encouraged self-reflection, while taking part in the community art project and bringing donations to the community service organization reminded audience members that they were part of a larger whole. The student leaders were introducing the audience to the ideas of *caring about* and *caring for*. As noted earlier, there were lobby activities that inhabited or suggested Zones 2–4.

Once they entered the auditorium, the slides projected on the screen and the printed concert program introduced audience members to more specific aspects of mental health and types of care. With slides ranging from Zone 2 through Zone 4 and a concert program visually depicting the various stops on the journey, the setting intensified and some foreshadowing occurred. Figure 15 depicts the Prologue’s location on the ECS.

Figure 15

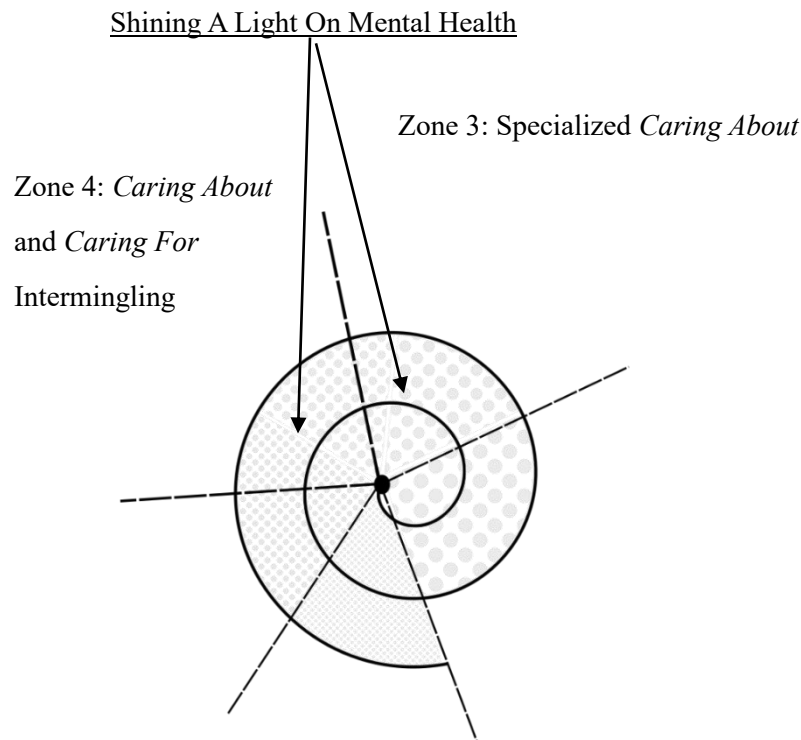
Telling the Story: Locating the Prologue on the ECS



The Characters of Mental Health are Introduced and the Scene is Set. The opening section of the concert, “Shining a Light on Mental Health,” was an emotional plea, a Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*) or 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling) experience depending on the receptivity and relationship of those involved. However, it foreshadowed the desire for Zone 5 (Stable *Caring For*) experiences that would occur later in the evening. The pre-performance activities had provided context and setting, but this opening section was the first official emotional chapter in their story, and Steve’s words in the opening reading of the concert demonstrated both the strength and the vulnerability the audience would encounter throughout the evening. Through his words, Steve let the audience know that they would be traveling on a journey during the course of the evening, one that went from Zone 2 awareness through Zone 5 offering of hope through *caring for*. The songs in this first concert section emphasized the emotional intensity of the student leaders. The concerns expressed in the lyrics of the song “Will I” (Larson, 1996) echoed the students’ own concerns about the vulnerability many teenagers face when opening up about mental health issues, and the “cry for help” that Steve noted in the song “Save Me” (Jelly Roll, 2020/2023) was, in a way, their own plea. Figure 16 depicts this section of the story on the Educational Care Spiral.

Figure 16

Telling the Story: Locating the First Concert Section on the ECS



Trials and Hardships. The next three sections of the concert were dark in nature, revealing some of the difficulties and resulting tribulations of modern teenage experiences. Journeying back and forth between Zones 2, 3, and 4, these sections reeled the audience in with Zone 2 (Generalized *Caring About*) material, then strove to firmly establish strong specialized *caring about* (Zone 3) by pointing out the relevance of the material and relating enough real-life details to hopefully evoke empathy and increase meaningfulness. These Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*) experiences comprised the bulk of this portion of the concert, but a few songs within these sections did achieve increased meaningfulness and the beginnings of *caring for*, making them Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling) experiences.

The anxiety section of the concert event told the story of desperation: the need for relief from the anxiety, the overbearing pressure by society to conform, and the poor and often destructive coping mechanisms used by many suffering individuals. The message in this part of the student story is dark, as both the readings and songs illustrate. This section's reading began with strong focus on awareness and reality on a personal and emotional level. The reading gave information about anxiety as a mental health disorder and used metaphors and descriptions to describe what anxiety felt like. The reading finished by relaying information from teacher interviews that depicted the prevalence of anxiety at the school, hopefully encouraging audience members into a Zone 3 experience with specialized and personal *caring about*.

This reading was followed by three Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*) songs, each of which expressed multiple goals in a one-sided but relational and personal manner, emphasizing both relevance and meaningfulness, but also revealing negative aspects and unanswered calls for help. "In My Blood" (Mendes et al., 2018) was one of the few songs that expressed elements of all four student goals, although some of those are the more negative perspectives of those goals. In the context of the concert event, the lyrics used descriptive words and similes to bring awareness and help people understand the reality of dealing with anxiety and pressure. It also pointed out the negative connotation of the acceptance goal; rather than asking for acceptance it described the negative effects of societal pressure to conform and cover up the problem, describing the typical harmful coping strategies often suggested by society. The song also included a cry for help, but it is worth noting that within the lyrics, help does not come.

The song “Lifeboat” (O’Keefe & Murphy, 2014) also expressed multiple goals, although it did not touch on all four. Descriptive language and metaphors brought awareness to teenage anxiety and described the reality of dealing with it, noting the feeling of being trapped. Similar to “In My Blood” (Mendes et al., 2018), this song also dealt with the negative connotations of the acceptance goal, pointing out the need for acceptance by bringing to the forefront the extreme societal pressure to conform, especially for teenagers.

The final song in the Anxiety section was a little different. Less focused on reality and more positive in its presentation, this piece simply brought awareness through an upbeat acceptance of the situation. Dealing more with relationships than mental health anxiety, the song “Monday Monday” (Phillips, 1966/2008) was chosen by the leaders, in part, due to its appeal to older generations. During the song selection process, Amelia pointed out how the style was different than anything else in the concert, which the leaders considered a positive attribute. There was not as much discussion regarding the lyrics, which is evident in the lack of direct relatedness compared to the other concert selections. However, the lyrics do relay an interesting acceptance of fate through their dichotomy, with the first verse describing the hope of Monday, and the second verse describing the resigned acceptance of a bad Monday. Despite its upbeat nature, the song does relay an overall negativity, which connected with many of the students who view Monday as a pivotal day of stress that signals the beginning of a week filled with homework, tests, and social drama.

The anxiety section was followed by the section on burnout. This section overall

felt more relational in nature with the students not only expressing their own experiences but reaching out to the audience and acknowledging their experiences as well. Each song seemed to represent a different part of the students' journeys with the acceptance of burnout. Similes were used in the reading to bring awareness to what living with burnout felt like, making it a Zone 2 (Generalized *Caring About*) reading.

The songs in the burnout section were Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*) and Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling) experiences. "This Is Me Trying" (Swift, 2020b) was probably the most relevant to average teenage life and was asking for acceptance and acknowledgment of the efforts made. It was also the most personal for many of the students. The verses relayed typical teenage feelings and experiences using first person perspective, and the chorus personally asked for acceptance, making it an attempt at a Zone 4 experience.

"Getting Older" (Eilish, 2021) was more like a diary entry. Direct and honest in its assessment of life, the lyrics candidly described experiences and feelings and recognized them as the truth of the situation. Presenting a different perspective from the previous song, "Getting Older" (Eilish, 2021) declared acceptance rather than begging for it, ending with an acknowledgment of moving from personal acceptance into potential relational care, making it a Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*) experience with a possible expansion into Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling).

"Old Man" (Bryan, 2020) went one step further by offering acceptance and *care for* others, acknowledging the validity of their sacrifices and experiences with burnout. Within the context of the concert event, the lyrics described sacrifices made and deeds

done long after burnout is reached, demonstrating awareness and knowledge of the reality of those sacrifices. The lyrics accepted the sacrifices, then ended with an offer of reciprocity, a beautiful Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling) moment that could even inhabit Zone 5 (Stable *Caring For*) depending on the existing relationship between performer and listener. Unlike the negative connotations of the previous section, this part of the student story was still dark in its presentation of reality but less focused on anger and more focused on moving forward.

The story of the next section, Depression, was complicated. It began with a reading that identified depression and acknowledged it as an issue. The reading contained words that could be interpreted as fulfilling the goals of awareness, reality, and help or support, which made me initially classify it as a Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*) reading. However, the impersonal nature of the reading and its third person voice made it less effective in achieving those goals. No one interviewed mentioned the reading and my analysis did not show as much meaningfulness and personalization in that reading compared to the other readings of the concert. Heavily weighted metaphorical descriptions within the reading lost some of their potential impact because they were followed not by personal or relational statements, but by facts regarding the unknown causes of depression. The reading ended with an acknowledgement of the importance of getting help, “the help of others provides a crutch, or some muscle to keep on fighting for motivation which helps to lighten the load of this boulder.” However, discussing the importance of help is less personal and relational than offering or asking for help — the reading acknowledged Care but did not actually interact with Care — which led me to

actually reclassify it as a Zone 2 (Generalized *Caring About*) reading.

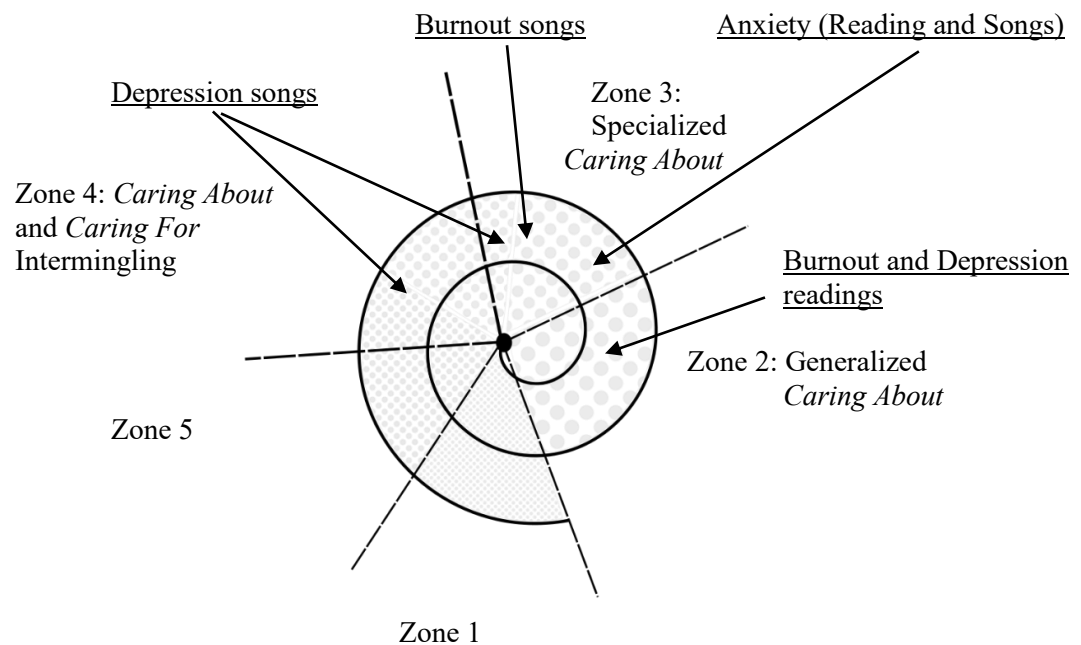
The songs in the depression section, however, were Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*) songs that expressed more complex truths of dealing with depression. Both “What Was I Made For” (O’Connell & O’Connell, 2023) and “Young and Sad” (Cyrus, 2020), expressed awareness and reality in very emotional and personal ways, but in addition to those goals, they each expressed an aspect of personal acceptance as well. With the song “What Was I Made For” (O’Connell & O’Connell, 2023), student leaders seemed to emphasize the time it takes to potentially heal from depression, if healing happens at all. They revealed the hopeless reality of teenage depression through the song’s lyrics that tended to glorify falseness instead of accepting truth but also embraced the potential for a better future. The musical ending of the song left the listener wondering — achieving happiness out of the depression seemed hoped for but undecided, almost as if the listener had potential influence on the outcome.

The student leaders’ next chosen song appeared to offer a temporary answer to that undecided query, but it was not positive. The song “Young and Sad” (O’Connell & O’Connell, 2023) did not focus on healing at all. Its placement in the concert event focused on the lyrics’ condemnation of society’s focus on people being happy all the time, expressing frustration at society’s lack of acceptance of sad or dark emotions with the opening words of the first regular verse. During the song the acceptance of depression seemed unchanging, with even the repetitive chord progression used in the music feeling like a forced acceptance of depression. Through this section, the students acknowledged an understanding of depression and its impact on life but also stressed the

need for time to deal with depression, criticizing society's view on the issue. This part of their story included judgement. Figure 17 depicts the location of these concert sections on the Educational Care Spiral.

Figure 17

Telling the Story: Locating the Trials and Hardships Sections on the ECS



A Moment of Rest and Healing for Our Weary Travelers. These dark sections were followed by a section with a different focus. Titled “Bringing Light Into the Darkness,” this section strove to live up to its name. When planning the concert, the leaders decided to put this section in to help the audience, a gesture of *caring for* towards the audience. They felt it was needed amidst all of what they described as “heavy stuff.” I believe it was their way of actually reaching out and telling the audience to continue trusting them on this journey and that everything would be ok. They did not want their

story to just be about obstacles, they also, as Steve wrote, wanted it to be about “hope.”

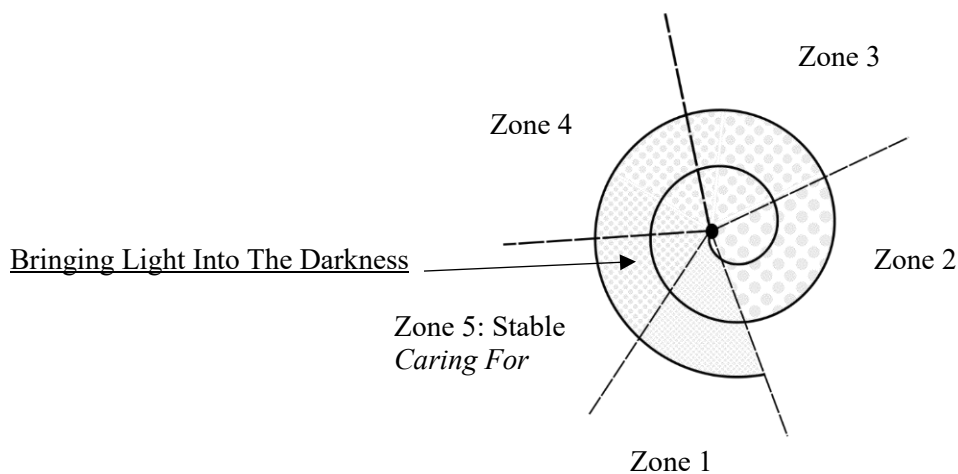
This section also modeled how many of the students felt about each other. They *cared with* each other and strove to help each other when needed. In the interviews, both student participants and student leaders talked about how close-knit they all were. Harry mentioned the safety he felt with the other Ensemble members and how this concert had brought them closer to each other. Steve and Amelia both noted how well the leaders worked together and listened to one another. This section provided the audience with a small window into that Caring part of their world, potentially extending that Care to the audience members as well. Although they could not *care with* the audience as they did with each other in class, they did offer to *care for* them and acknowledge the Care they had received from their friends and family — a beautiful Zone 5 (Stable *Caring For*) experience. As a midpoint in the concert, the section moved away from the awareness and reality goals and focused instead on acceptance and help or support. The entire section was very relational. In the reading, Steve mentioned awareness, but he primarily focused on reaching out in support in an accepting and Care-full nature.

The only song in the section, “Rescue” (Daigle, 2020), presented a similar sentiment of awareness wrapped up in a show of support, but from a different perspective. In the context of the concert event, its lyrics held more of an assumed awareness or acknowledgement of a problem or obstacle, but with a very clear offer of help. In contrast to the reading, which was offering support to someone in hopes they would accept it, the song was actually the second part of relational caring, a response to someone asking for help. Audience interviews revealed strong positive and relational

responses to this Zone 5 section. As a midpoint rest stop, the students used this section to offer the audience a musical embrace. Figure 18 positions this hopeful and Caring section on the Educational Care Spiral.

Figure 18

Telling the Story: Locating the Concert Midpoint Section on the ECS



Personal Trials. The next two sections were once again dark, but deeper and more personal. Steve made a comment in his interview about how “Waving Through a Window” (Pasek & Paul, 2017b) represented many aspects of his high school years. I think he is not alone in that. The loneliness section tried to relay that story of high school to the audience. It was a way for the students to share their experiences and feelings of loneliness in a safe manner, reaching out in hopes of someone responding back.

The loneliness reading was more relational than the songs, in part because it offered a response to loneliness. In the reading, Izzy brought awareness to loneliness by

using a quote from a character on a popular TV show, then she described how lack of community increases loneliness. Finally, she both presented the reality of loneliness within the school community and offered help through that community. The varying aspects of Care that Izzy expressed in this reading emphasized the Caring approach she and the other leaders embraced. First, she acknowledged how loneliness can isolate you from others, keeping you from the Care that you need and thereby encouraging you to work on those relationships, “when you embrace loneliness you also accept the position of searching for community, of bettering the relationships around you.” She then offered herself and the school community as a means of support and finished the reading by reinforcing the *caring with* relationship amongst the students, noting that the songs in this section of the concert were “being sung by students who have faced and continue to face adversity, and they are being sung in unity. Let this be a reminder of those who can help you move forward.” This reading could be interpreted as either Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling) or Zone 5 (Stable *Caring For*), depending on listener response to the offer of Care and the pre-existing relationship between listener and reader.

The reading was followed by two Zone 4 songs that were much more one-sided, presenting a desperate need for relational care from a position of isolation, emphasizing the emotional impact of loneliness to the audience. This emphasis had the potential to increase empathy and meaningfulness while also continuing to build awareness and relevance. The lyrics in “Need You Now” (Haywood et al., 2009) clearly stated such a position, bluntly referencing a current state of loneliness but a need for someone to be

there. The lyrics in the song “Waving Through a Window” (Pasek & Paul, 2017b) presented the feelings of isolation, loneliness, and a need for others primarily through metaphors. The very nature of loneliness is unreciprocated care; these songs both cry out for relational Care, waiting in limbo for someone to accept that loneliness and respond.

The next section focused on body-image and self-perception, an intense emotional part of the story for many. Several interviews mentioned the relevance and meaningfulness of this section, specifically the song “Pretty Isn’t Pretty” (Rodrigo, 2023), demonstrating that the section was, indeed, impactful. The girls in particular wanted to be heard; they wanted their perspective on this issue to be understood, and this was their chance to express it.

The section opened with a reading very bluntly focused on awareness and reality. The reading began with a general description of body-image issues among teenagers, followed by an increase in relevance and reality with a quote from a student at the school. The reading then presented clinical information regarding eating disorders, followed by a declaration of the intent to offer both gender perspectives on this issue through the music selections. This awareness of gender differences concerning this topic was brought up in leadership meetings by the student leaders. They felt it was very important to represent both sides.

This Zone 2 (Generalized *Caring About*) reading was followed by two songs that also included the goals of awareness and reality but touched on other goals as well. “Man in the Mirror” (Ballard & Garrett, 2011) was the selection chosen by the student leaders to represent the male perspective on self-perception. The leaders felt that the piece was

more about personal “insecurities” than eating disorders or self-perception, but they could not find any other piece that better represented the male perspective for this topic. The song acknowledged past bad choices and depicted a man helping himself and taking charge of making things better.

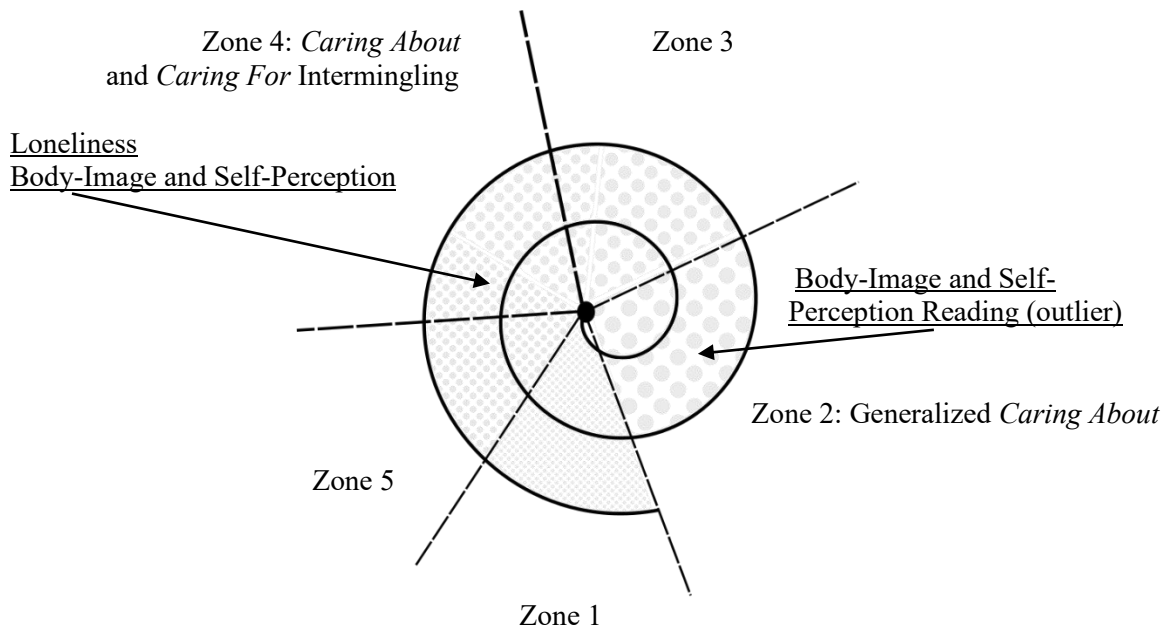
By contrast, the leaders had many songs to choose from to represent the female perspective on this issue. They chose, “Pretty Isn’t Pretty” (Rodrigo, 2023), over a close contender because it was written in first person instead of third person perspective. It also presented the material in a much more candid and bold manner. The lyrics of the song described teenage girls’ daily reality in an almost enraged manner, depicting the battle between self and societal expectations as a fight that can never be won. The relentlessness of the lyrics during the verses emphasized the pervasiveness of the issue and showed an almost angry acceptance of society’s stance. The combative lyrics of the chorus further emphasized this view, as did the title of the song, ultimately passing judgement on society’s harsh and restrictive definition of beauty. Analyzing the lyrics of this piece, I initially classified it as a Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*) song that encouraged strong personalized *caring about* through blunt depictions of awareness, reality, and negative acceptance. However, I re-examined my classification due to the strong emotional response during the performance and the numerous references to it during interviews. The temporary connections amongst the various females performing and listening to the song justifies a Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling) classification due to the temporary relational *caring for* connection experienced by both performers and listeners. Singers seemed to be reaching out in desperation and women in

the audience responded to that, albeit temporarily. It was a powerful moment of connection.

Placing these sections on the Educational Care Spiral includes the acknowledgement of an outlier. Both sections included complex elements regarding relational caring, isolation, acceptance, and societal views, most of which occupied Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling). Despite its portrayal of isolation, the Loneliness section still demonstrated intense and meaningful *caring about* intermingling with one-sided or temporary *caring for*. The Body-Image and Self-Perception songs also encouraged emotionally intense but temporary relational caring experiences. However, the reading for the Body-Image and Self-Perception section was only a Zone 2 (Generalized *Caring About*) experience. Despite that outlier, the overall intensity of this portion of the concert was strong and the general effect was one of relational care. Figure 19 (p. 304) depicts the location of these sections and the outlier on the Educational Care Spiral. Notice how the outlier is on the opposite side of the ECS from the rest of the material in this part of the concert event — a location that places it closer to material from previous sections.

Figure 19

Telling the Story: Placing the Personal Trials Sections on the ECS



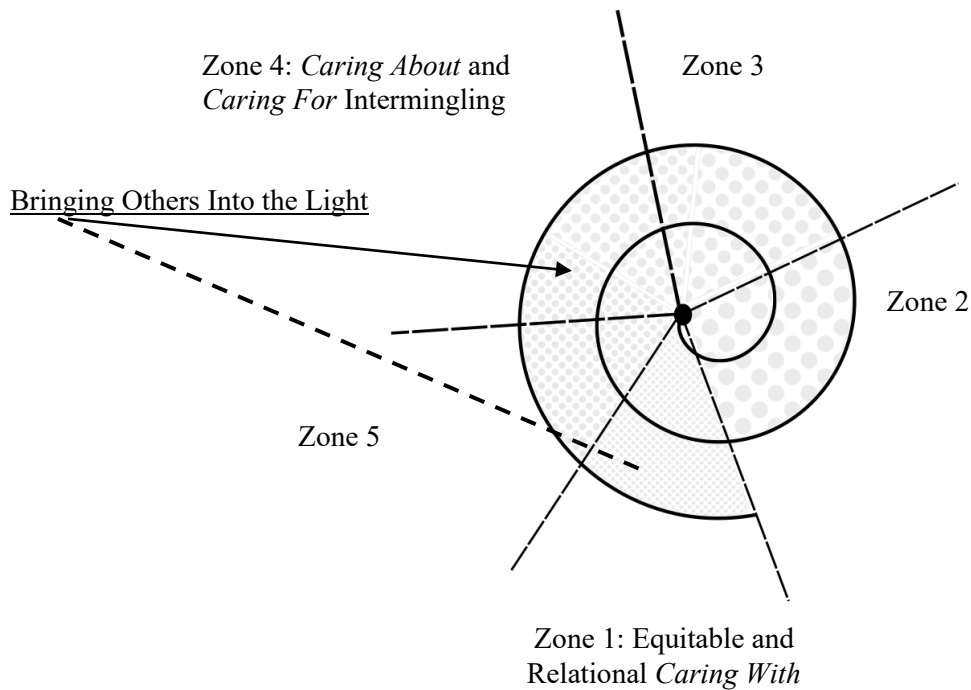
Please Hear Us and See Us For Who We Really Are. The section that followed, “Bringing Others Into the Light,” was almost bluntly autobiographical. James remarked in his interview how they all connected with the song in this section, “Anonymous Ones” (Pasek et al., 2021). Up to this point in the concert, they had spent time relaying all these various mental health issues and trying to help the audience understand that these issues existed within the daily lives of those in the school community. In this section, they brought it all together, emphasizing that the facade they each put forth hides many of these other issues already mentioned. The section was very outreach oriented, with both the reading and the song focused on Care and touching on all four of the student goals.

The reading inhabited Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling), while also referencing Zone 1 (Equitable and Relational *Caring With*). It began with quotes from student reflections on the upcoming song of the section which Izzy described as students united in a common struggle. She followed these quotes with a reference to the students *caring with* one another (Zone 1) as she expressed their togetherness, a form of *caring with* each other to overcome obstacles, “we all strive to no longer be anonymous.” She then finished the reading with an inspiring quote by Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman, offering hope and strength, an aspect of *caring for*. We do not know whether that offer was accepted or reciprocated, making it a Zone 4 experience.

This reading was followed by the song “Anonymous Ones” (Pasek et al., 2021). During the concert event, the lyrics in the song sent a message similar to the reading, first offering awareness and reality by describing the daily lives of people who feel anonymous and overlooked, followed by an expression of unity and hope with the final lyrics of the song. As with the reading, the song encouraged Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling) but referenced the unity of those society overlooked. This unity becomes a metaphor for the students when considering their intense connection with the lyrics, breathing a very personalized meaning into the song and referencing Zone 1 (Equitable and Relational *Caring With*). Figure 20 depicts the location of this section on the ECS. Since the section resides primarily in Zone 4 but references Zone 1, a dotted line is used to depict the Zone 1 reference while the customary solid line illustrates the section’s strong Zone 4 ties.

Figure 20

Telling the Story: Locating Bringing Others Into the Light on the ECS.



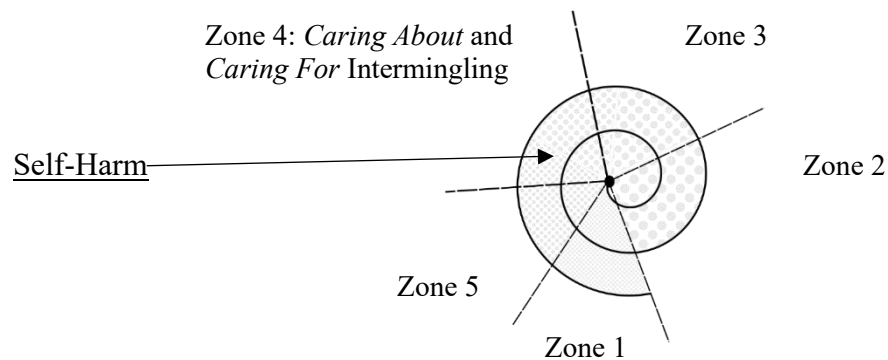
Leave No One Behind. The darkest section of the concert was next, the section focused on self-harm. This part of the students' story was emotional and outreach driven. There had been a recent news story of someone in a nearby school committing suicide after dealing with a wide array of bullying problems. This section served as a gentle reminder to everyone that such things can happen anywhere, so *caring for* others is important. The topic was dealt with differently than the other topics. I had numerous discussions with the student leaders about this topic, and they expressed their desire to be very sensitive and offer resources for those needing them. I also spoke to them about being careful with the song choice, not wanting to romanticize suicide in any way. They decided to have a faculty member from the theology department write and present the

reading at the concert, ensuring that no student was put in the difficult position of discussing something publicly they were not equipped to discuss. The reading was very caring and sermon-like in a non-judgmental manner, reminding people of God’s love and offering hope.

The song the students chose for this section also focused on support but presented in a slightly different manner. The lyrics in the song “How To Save A Life” (Fray, 2006) gave instructions and encouragement to those trying to help someone who is having suicidal or self-harm thoughts. The lyrics assumed an already existing relationship that can no longer be reciprocated, choosing instead to reach out to potentially help others, making it a song that technically resides in Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling) but wishes for Zone 5 (Stable *Caring For*). The lyrics recounted the unfortunate consequences of refusing to reach out and *care for* someone. In the collective narrative, the leaders used it as a sort of gentle but firm reminder of the potential dire consequences if their story was ignored. Figure 21 depicts this section on the ECS.

Figure 21

Telling the Story: Locating the Self-Harm Section on the ECS



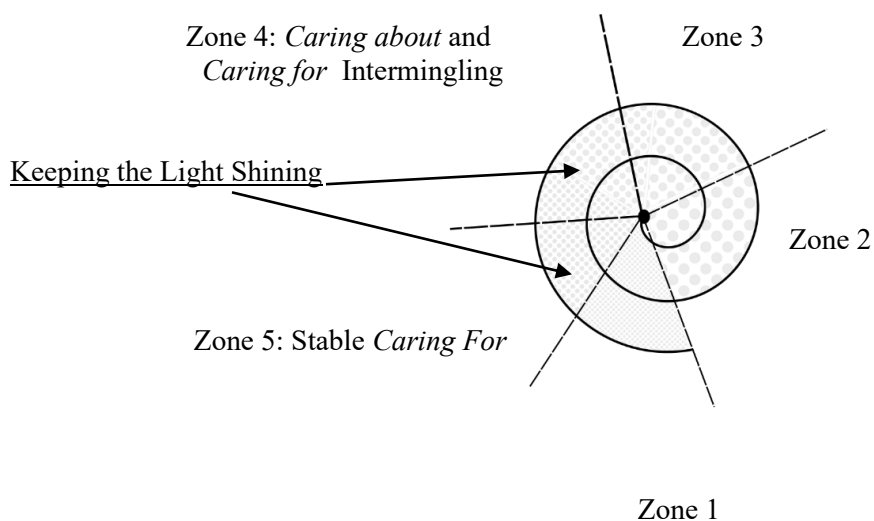
Together, We Can Change Things. The final section of the concert, “Keeping the Light Shining,” was a high energy conclusion to the students’ collective narrative. With its message of hope and demand for action, the students seemed to be holding the audience accountable, reminding them that the impact of this concert needed to be felt long after the event itself had ended. This section of the concert had an assumed awareness throughout, but it was primarily focused on acceptance and help from a positive perspective. It offered one side of *caring for* with the hope of that Care being reciprocated, making the entire section Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling), with the potential for Zone 5 (Stable *Caring For*) if the listener decided to continue the relationship. Steve’s reading was written in the form of a personal conversation with the audience, during which he offered encouragement, extending Care outwards to the listeners. He finished by asking the audience to share that hope with others, a plea to try to *care with* and *for* others.

The songs continued expressing that message of hope. The first song in the section, “Keep Holding On” (Lavigne & Gottwald, 2009), advanced that expression of community and hope through lyrics that offered unwavering strength and support. The next song, “I’m Still Standing” (John & Taupin, 2018), was more victorious in nature, offering hope from the perspective of one who has overcome obstacles. The final song in the section, “Louder Than Words” (Larson, 1990/2021), went beyond offering strength or support and demanded it instead. By relaying the consequences of ambivalence in the verses of the song, the words urged listeners to step up and help others, finishing with a chorus that bluntly offered the listeners a choice between taking action or sitting by and

doing nothing. The student leaders were no longer simply asking for reciprocation, they were presenting it as an obligation. Figure 22 locates this final section of the performance on the Educational Care Spiral.

Figure 22

Telling the Story: Locating Keeping the Light Shining on the ECS.



The Epilogue. The final closing moments of the story occurred in the lobby after the performance was over. Audience members and student participants were encouraged to look at the lobby exhibits (the activities were on display but no longer interactive). They were also encouraged to visit with the school counselor if they had any concerns and pick up information from a local agency that aided those dealing with mental health conditions. The school counselor visited briefly with individuals as they came by the table, and the student leaders were scattered throughout the lobby to thank people for attending. The information available on the table included hotline numbers, pamphlets,

and basic information sheets. This final component was an act of relational outreach to the audience by the student leaders, trying to bring everyone into the community and ensuring that resources were available if needed. It was one last attempt at *caring for*, but it was the decision of audience members whether or not to accept the Care that was being offered. It was also a type of thank you from the student leaders, an appreciation of the journey they had traveled together. The effects of this epilogue are difficult to place on the ECS due to lack of data, but the purpose demonstrated by the student leaders was to bring the audience into *caring with* relationships, an attempt to come full circle and bring the audience into the Zone 1 (Equitable and Relational *Caring With*) that the Ensemble students already inhabited.

Audience Interaction with the Story

The entire concert was about Care, from the minute the audience members walked into the lobby, through all the performative aspects, and until they left for the evening. Through Care, the concert event helped audience members explore mental health issues both personally and in relation to the students and surrounding community. Not every audience member had the exact same reaction, nor was the evening a linear experience. Rather, it was a winding and spiraling journey through the various zones, one that had many paths and rest stops along the way. Not every audience member or participant reached the same final destination, but they all took part in the journey.

Putting It All Together

Examining the results of this research using the Educational Care Spiral, it becomes evident that the Zones of Care intended through the student goals generally

align with the Zones of Care from the meaningfulness and relevance analysis. People's perceptions of the concert event, my analysis of the event, and the students' intended goals of the event all primarily reside in Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*) and Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling), with a few exceptions. Although awareness could be seen as either a Zone 2 or Zone 3 goal, the effect at the concert event was primarily Zone 3, very specialized *caring about*. The same can be said about relevance; most relevance mentioned by audience members and participants was Zone 3 relevance.

Even though general relevance existed, such as the general presence of mental health conditions and the basic educational relevance of performing and leading, it did not register with people as relevance that was worth mentioning, possibly because it was simply assumed or taken for granted. The intensity of emotion and personalization brought on by many of the readings and songs was often carried one step further into one-sided relational Care, or Zone 4 experiences. These experiences tended to revolve more around the acceptance and help/support goals, although some powerful presentations related to the reality goal also fell into this category. These experiences were also representative of much of the meaningfulness data. Zone 5 (Stable *Caring For*) was very difficult to achieve during the actual event because there was no guarantee of reciprocity or longevity. Interview data, however, revealed a few experiences that were Zone 5 experiences. These were the result of the concert planning or event enhancing meaning and Care in already existing relationships.

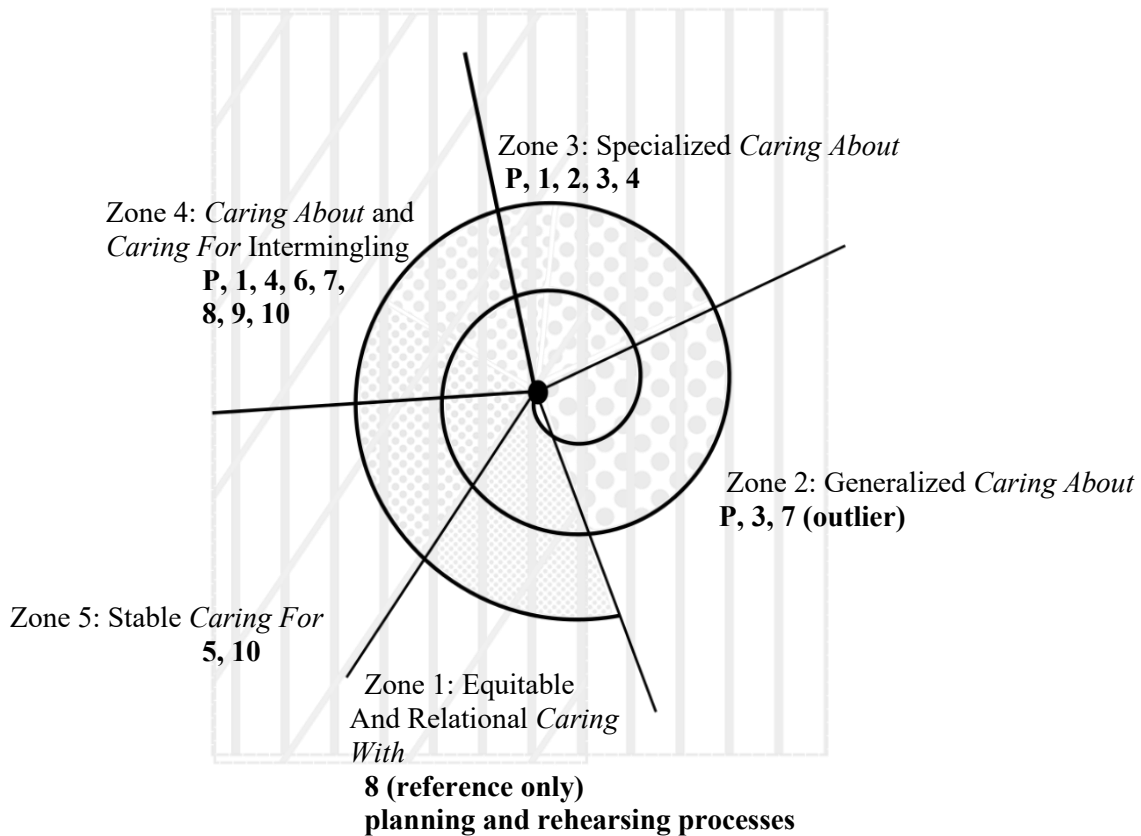
Furthering applying my analysis to the research questions, the ECS emphasizes

the meaningfulness and relevance of both the planning processes and the concert event. The Care and shared power dynamics promoted dialogue that empowered the students and encouraged *caring with*. By conducting the planning and rehearsing primarily within that Zone 1 (Equitable and Relational *Caring With*), students were able to work together to set goals that further promoted student voice by creating a collective narrative. Through this narrative, students inspired both *caring about* and *caring for* in themselves and others. They also encouraged social freedom and acceptance of the mental health issues present in their daily lives, ultimately using music to develop and express their own identities in a relational and accepting manner.

Figure 23 (p. 313) presents the main components of the concert in relation to relevance, meaningfulness, and the Educational Care Spiral. Notice on the right side of the diagram is primarily relevance (notated with the vertical gray background lines), whereas the left side of the diagram indicates meaningfulness (diagonal gray background lines) and relevance. Each concert section is numbered, with the key located below the diagram. While not a strict adherence, notice how the earlier parts of the program occupy more of Zone 2 (Generalized *Caring About*) and Zone 3 (Specialized *Caring About*), whereas the later parts of the program occupy more of Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling) and Zone 5 (Stable *Caring For*).

Figure 23

Putting It All Together on the ECS



P = Prologue

1 = Shining a Light on Mental Health

2 = A Spotlight on Anxiety

3 = A Spotlight on Burnout

4 = A Spotlight on Depression

5 = Bringing Light Into the Darkness

6 = A Spotlight on Loneliness

7 = A Spotlight on Body-Image and Self-Perception

8 = Bringing Others Into the Light

9 = Shattering the Darkness on Self-harm

10 = Keeping the Light Shining

Implications of this Care-filled Storytelling Journey for Choral Classrooms

The broader implications of this storytelling and journey of Care are encouraging. These findings demonstrate students' abilities to model, encourage, and implement varying forms of Care while storytelling. With particular emphasis on sensitivity towards others, awareness of societal mores, and a focus on community response, this research

shows that storytelling through music is possible in an educational setting. The positive audience response found within this data suggests that this form of music education can be positively received by parents and administration if implemented as part of a larger whole within a music education program.

Connections to Social Justice, Theoretical Groundings, and Pedagogical Practices

I consider the concert event a social justice activity, loosely fulfilling the frames of activity mentioned by de Quadros (2019) and many aspects of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970). The students examined the world around them and worked to make that world better for those with mental health conditions, specifically focusing on the students at their school but including other community members as well. Through their inclusion of others at the school and out in the community, they created an event that benefited others and brought more widespread awareness to an important social issue. As noted previously, there were aspects of the project's grounding in Care that were in discord with CP, but in most cases that discord provided an impetus to move forward towards more equitable and empowering interactions. Although much of the Care reflected during the concert event incorporated an unequal power dynamic, the grounding in equitable *caring with* encouraged more nuance and promoted the idea of working together towards justice rather than trying to hand out liberation.

Examining my teaching practices, I found many successes. Care permeated the entire project, moving beyond the classroom to encompass members of the community as well. There was increased relevance, combatting the concerns of isolation and lack of relevance raised by Regelski (2006). There was also more effective implementation of

aspects of CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and CSP (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris and Alim, 2014, 2017), including implementation that had depth, was not additive in nature, and built connections between school and community. There was also empowerment of student voice, including student storytelling and the valuing of student stories and perspectives as knowledge as advocated by an educational application of the storytelling promoted by Delgado and Stefancic (2017). The students critically examined the world around them and worked to invest in their own emancipation regarding mental health stigma, important elements of CP (Freire, 1970. Giroux, 2020). The student-created concert event was a social justice element that related directly to the students' lives, fulfilling the requests of Lewis (2020) to ensure the relevance of social justice components and, as mentioned previously, meeting requirements for a social justice activity described by de Quadros (2019). Through the use of dialogue, it also embraced a more modern and less dictatorial form of choral education.

Unfortunately, there were a few components that were not as successful as originally hoped. The audience participation element was different from what I expected. Physically, interaction between audience and performers was only available in the lobby and participation was inconsistent. Emotionally the audience participation was intensified and the engagement within the auditorium was noticeably increased. The audience appeared to feel more involved, but the wall between audience and performer was still not broken down in the manner I had originally intended. The concert was also still primarily Eurocentric. Although the music was pop and musical theater rather than classical, there was still an underrepresentation of music that represented non-European

cultures.

Final Reflections

This project grew out of my desire to offer more to my students, more diversity of sounds and styles, more options for music making, more musical interpretations, more connectivity, more voice, more meaning, and more relevance. As a choral director, I wanted my high school students to experience music in a manner that was personally meaningful beyond the classroom walls, the school's performing arts center, the notes learned, and the vocal technique applied. I desired my students to find a relevance in music that would be sustainable even if they never sang another note after graduating high school, that emboldened them to make an impact. I had tried implementing various diversity-focused pedagogies through different teaching methods, and I had worked diligently to create a caring environment where students felt comfortable offering song suggestions and accepting both support and critique, but it was still primarily my concert, my program, and my vision. My students' inner voices, identities, and stories were not being heard. This project was my way of breaking through those monologic barricades.

Applying what I had learned through research literature and practical teaching, I tried a different manner of instruction. Grounded in Care, I taught my students in a manner that was more dialogic than monologic, and more focused on meaning and service than applause and grades. I invited my students to create their own social justice concert event about a topic of their choosing. It was their leadership that would pick the music, coordinate service opportunities, determine concert flow, and involve the community.

I focused this study on the students' and audience members' responses to that more dialogic and Care-filled manner of teaching and the resulting social justice concert event, hoping to gain a detailed picture of what type of impact, if any, this new teaching style might have had. When I began analyzing all the data, I found plenty of evidence to answer my research questions, and I recognized the true importance of the Care that brought it all together.

The Educational Care Spiral and the Importance of Care in My Own Classroom

To better represent these connections, I created the Educational Care Spiral (ECS). The ECS, an ever-widening spiral that is divided into five zones, allows for a fluid approach to analyzing Care in the classroom, recognizing that not all teaching interactions fall neatly into the *caring about* (Noddings, 2012, 2013, 2017), *caring for* (Noddings, 2012, 2013, 2017), and *caring with* (Hendricks, 2021a, 2023, 2025) categories. The ECS acknowledges and respects the importance of those categories while also allowing for more of a progressive continuum that eventually circles back on itself.

Analyzing the data from this study caused me to reflect on my practices as a choral teacher and I began to recognize the importance of all five Zones of Care in my own teaching. Each zone has its own function and importance in education. Since my initial data collection and analysis, I have actively worked to define, in my own teaching, when each zone is most beneficial to my students. I then strive to actively incorporate the form of Care from that zone, always trying to recognize where we, as a class, have come from (the previous zone) and where we are going (the next zone). My next task is to begin incorporating the various Zones of Care from the ECS into my curriculum

mapping, and I hope to encourage other educators to do so as well. Purposeful incorporation of Care, in all its forms, and Care-filled continuity within the classroom has the potential to positively influence music education in a meaningful way.

Some Positive Reflections and Teaching Analysis

Applying the Educational Care Spiral to various diversity focused pedagogical techniques and applications of theory can potentially provide insight into their effectiveness. Within this project, aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017) that resulted in student experiences in Zone 3 (*Specialized Caring About*) and Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling) demonstrated more depth, meaningfulness, and relevance than Zone 2 (*Generalized Caring About*) experiences. Student empowerment, the presence of student voice, and the shared power dynamics that resulted from Care-filled dialogic teaching also appeared to increase in intensity in Zone 4 (*Caring About* and *Caring For* Intermingling), Zone 5 (*Stable Caring For*), and Zone 1 (*Equitable and Relational Caring With*); as the students' Care became more relational, the meaningful use of their voice also seemed to grow. The very nature and intensity of the Care throughout the project helped the students liberate themselves from the traditional constraints of school music, examining their chosen topic (mental health) in a critical manner. It was the Caring process that was important. They did not care *because* it was a social justice event; rather, it became a social justice event *because they Cared*.

Some Underdeveloped Areas Within the Project

There were some areas that I had originally hoped to address in my research that I had to abandon, and other areas that were present but simply not as prominent or developed as I would have liked. This was due, in large part, to my choice to relinquish so much control to the students. By removing myself from much of the decision-making role during the planning, I was restricted regarding what I could and could not add. I realized the necessity and effects of these unavoidable casualties afterwards. Many of the areas lacking were aspects that I had only covered with the students previously on a surface level, so the students either did not choose to implement them at all, or they implemented them poorly due to their lack of comfort. Other areas lacking centered around ideas or ideologies that I deemed important but were seen by the students as more superfluous.

The dominance of Western Standard Music Notation was one area that was problematic. I had hoped to make WSMN less pervasive. Unfortunately, my previous work with the students regarding non-standard notation had been scarce, so there was no reason to assume that the students would implement such practices on their own. Even though their music reading abilities varied, the students were used to referring to the music and following it during the learning process. It was typically through a combination of WSMN and aural skills that the students identified foundational elements of their parts and studied the interplay between the different vocal and accompaniment lines, and I was unable to make any changes in that process during this project. The addition of the other dialogic elements regarding song analysis, discussion, and

interpretation already took up more class time, so also changing the way I actually taught the music was not a realistic option. Unfortunately, this meant that WSMN continued to dominate the classroom. However, since I was the one arranging much of the music, I was able to adapt the style of each piece as needed. This meant that even though WSMN was used, the Western European classical style of singing and harmonies were not necessarily common, and the performers had more freedom to intuitively respond to the music.

Audience participation was also an underdeveloped area due to lack of comfort. De Quadros (2019) had pointed out the exclusivity and distance that resulted from the Western European tradition of separating the performers from the audience, so I had hoped to more fully involve the audience. The students were uninterested in having the audience sing along with any of the music, but they did encourage audience participation in other ways, including bringing donations and participating in the pre-performance interactive lobby activities. While this did not fit my original vision, I felt that these elements, combined with the intense emotional participation of some audience members (as noted in the interviews), was a progressive step. There will have to be additional publicity and work done in the future for audience participation to be considered normal in my school setting, and I realize now that breaking down the wall between audience and performer may or may not be a realistic goal in certain school or formal settings.

While not necessarily a significant shortcoming in this particular project, I was concerned about one potential impediment to a diverse and equitable implementation of a dialogic concert event such as this: whether the students would choose music

representing a variety of styles and genres. It was not considered unusual by my students to sing music in different styles, so they felt comfortable exploring different genres, and the student leaders came from relatively diverse backgrounds, so they embraced a variety of perspectives. Even so, there were some non-Eurocentric musical styles missing that I wish had been included. At times the student leaders made conscious decisions to go beyond their own personal comfort zones to express different points of view, an aspect natural to many of these leaders but potentially problematic with other groups. Reflection on this process has made me aware of the importance of establishing respect and openness with students before embarking on a project such as this. Embracing otherness and demonstrating respect for differing views have to be established ahead of time. Without proper preparation in that area, this project could run the risk of reinscribing stereotypes and hierarchies.

Practical Implications of this Research: The Big Picture

In a discussion regarding race, critical pedagogy, and dialogue, de Quadros et al. (2021) wrote, “We need to find a way to say the things that cannot be spoken in such a way that they do not hurt or diminish but are open to critique and analysis” (p. 7). Although not centered on race, I strove to apply a similar goal to this project. By establishing Care as the foundation upon which all else occurred, I was able to implement a more dialogic form of choral teaching that encouraged storytelling and student voice, while also giving space for CRP, CSP, and CP. The result was a manner of teaching that afforded students more freedom of expression without damaging or exploiting otherness, encouraged reflection and analysis, and was open to critique and future growth. Such

Care-filled and dialogic choral practices could be used in a variety of settings; this student-led concert event discussed mental health in a manner previously unexplored, but it opens the doors to future discussions and actions about a variety of equity, diversity, and social justice topics. Since this project took place, I have noticed an ever-widening yet increased focus within my own classroom on outreach and social justice from my students as they have chosen the topics for their concert events each year, with the students choosing to embrace issues in their community revolving around issues such as families and immigration. My hope is that such a template for student dialogue and empowerment could be used by other teachers wishing to explore social justice in their teaching. Because it is centered around student voice, it can potentially be tailored and individualized to fit the specific students or school setting involved.

This research also provides ideas for establishing a different type of meaningfulness and relevance in school choir programs. By focusing on the lyrics and encouraging student interpretation and discussion around song meaning and context, teachers can potentially help students move music learning beyond the classroom walls and performance halls. This lays the foundation for more involvement between the surrounding communities and the schools. It also provides opportunities for students to embrace new leadership and activist roles that combine their love of music with the broader community.

Finally, I hope that this research inspires teachers to try something new. We have much to teach our students, but we can also learn much from them. Trying a new technique or approach, listening to student suggestions, and expanding our reach beyond

our hallowed concert traditions is often discouraged, but I hope that such traditionalism is changing. De Quadros (2019) spoke of the need to change our normalized views of choir; this can be a part of that drive for change.

Future Research

There are several areas of related research that could be conducted to build on this study, further examining this type of teaching and its impacts. Future research into the long-term effects of implementing this type of project would be beneficial, examining both musical and nonmusical elements. A student-led project like this could be part of a larger choral program that still includes more “traditional” concerts as well, both existing in a nonhierarchical manner. Studying students’ music progress, leadership progress, social awareness, and ability to switch between traditional and non-traditional elements in such programs would be valuable. In my own classroom, the general classroom environment and presence of student voice have continued to shift and evolve since this research. Studying the progression of such ideals over a several year period could provide better insight into the potential impact of this form of teaching on a music education program and the individual students involved.

Continued research into the applicability of the Educational Care Spiral as an evaluative tool in teaching could provide more nuanced insight into the role of Care in education. If music educators were able to incorporate a Care-journey on the ECS as part of their curriculum planning, multiple areas could be affected, including meaningfulness, relevance, classroom environment, student voice, connectivity between school and home, and criticality.

Studying the response of different demographic groups to this sort of student-led project and manner of teaching would be helpful in understanding its effectiveness. Such research could then provide feedback toward improving its implementation or adapting implementation to fit different student or school demographics.

A Lasting Impression

Hess (2019b) stressed that place and experience were an important aspect of music education. By engaging in dialogue and encouraging student voice, this project examined the existing context and meaning of musical works and then used those works in a storytelling experience that essentially transformed them. For many of us taking part in this project, whether in the classroom or in the audience, our experience with the music of the concert event changed our perceptions. Those songs now inhabit a different place within us, and our experience with them has the potential to affect our future interactions with such music. It was through an emphasis on personal experience that the songs' meanings became personal, and the attention to school and community context allowed those musical works to inhabit a space larger than the concert hall and longer lasting than the concert event. For me and many others involved, those songs are now linked to the meaning and context given to them by this project.

The core component of that lasting impression is Care. My understanding of that term in relation to education is forever changed, and I find that it applies to every piece of music I teach, every interaction I have with my students, and every lesson plan I create. I now filter my teaching decisions through the ECS, understanding that I need to do my best to embrace all five Zones of Care if I am to best serve my students. My students, too,

have been and will continue to be forever changed by this project. Many of those that took part in the research have stayed in touch, despite being hundreds of miles away in college. Their perception of the music, the Care they felt and experienced, and their beliefs in their own abilities to transform the world have, at least partially, stayed with them one way or another. Even more exciting, the atmosphere of Care has continued to grow and permeate my teaching, so the students I teach today assume they will walk into my class each day to experience a Care-filled choral classroom. It is not perfect, but each week I watch as students offer song suggestions, engage in meaning-making with song lyrics, and enter into dialogue about issues that are important to them.

I am not the teacher I once was. I am not the embodiment of any of the teachers I had, nor am I the product of any particular teacher training. I do not align with exact pedagogical theories, and I do not adhere to any one particular form of classroom management. I teach from a position of Care, and that changes how I teach every day. It allows me to be more fluid, more engaged, and more connected to my students, and because I Care my students Care too. That is the most important result of all.

Appendix A

Program from concert

*Note: Formatting has been changed to fit within the formatting, page layout, and margins of this dissertation, and some content has been removed or changed to protect confidentiality. These omissions and pseudonyms are indicated by an **

You Are Not Alone – Shining A Light On Mental Health – A Saint School* Choral Concert

March 13, 2024 – 7:00 pm

Saint School* PAC

Introductory remarks

Shining a Light on Mental Health

Will I

*Larson, arranged**

General Chorus, Command Performance

Save Me

*Ford, arranged**

Command Performance

A Spotlight on Anxiety

In My Blood

Mendes, Geiger, arranged

General Chorus

Lifeboat

*O'Keefe, arranged**

Command Performance

Monday, Monday

Phillips, arr. Emerson

General Chorus

A Spotlight on Burnout

This Is Me Trying

*Swift, Antonoff, arranged**

General Chorus, Command Performance, 8th grade

Old Man

*Bryan, arranged**

General Chorus, Command Performance, 8th grade

Getting Older

*O'Connell, arranged**

Command Performance

A Spotlight on Depression

What Was I Made For?

O'Connell, arr. Cook

General Chorus

Young and Sad

*Cyrus, arranged**

Command Performance

Bringing Light Into the Darkness

Rescue *Daigle, Ingram, Mabury*
General Chorus, Command Performance

A Spotlight on Loneliness

Need You Now *Haywood, Kelley, arranged**
Command Performance

Waving Through A Window *Pasek, Paul, arr. Emerson*
General Chorus, Command Performance

A Spotlight on Body-Image and Self-Perception

Man in the Mirror *Ballard, Garrett, arr. Shaw*
General Chorus, Command Performance

Pretty Isn't Pretty *Rodrigo, Allen, arranged**
General Chorus, Command Performance

Bringing Others Into the Light

Anonymous Ones *Pasek, Paul, Stenberg*
General Chorus, Command Performance

Shattering the Darkness on Self-Harm

How To Save A Life *Slade, King, arranged**
Command Performance

Keeping the Light Shining

Keep Holding On *Lavigne, Gottwald, arr. Huff*
Command Performance

I'm Still Standing *John, Taupin, arr. Schmutte*
General Chorus, 8th grade

Louder Than Words *Larson, arranged**
General Chorus, Command Performance

Student Leadership Committee:

*Student names**

Upper School Choral Director and Fine Arts Dept Chair: Candy Coonfield
Middle School Music and Guitar Instructor: *
Accompanist: *

Thank you to the Saint School administration for their support of this endeavor and to all friends and family for their support.

All donations at tonight's concert benefit *local community service organization**. For more information on the services they provide, visit *community service organization website**

If you or anyone you know is experiencing mental health issues,
please seek help – don't stay in the darkness.

There is literature available in the lobby from local service providers for those needing help, and our school counselor, * will also be available after the concert to greet you and answer any questions you may have.

COPES Crisis Hotline: *local crisis support phone number**

*Ending rhetoric involving Saint School's Core Values and their connection to the concert.**

Appendix B

Interview questions for students (both student participants and student leaders)

- In what ways, if any, did this concert experience (planning, rehearsing, and performance) allow your own voice and perspective to be heard and recognized?
- In what ways was this overall concert experience different for you than other concerts?
- What are your thoughts on the planning, rehearsing, and performance experiences?
- In what ways, if any, did you connect with the concert material? In what ways, if any, did they impact you?
- Was power shared during this planning, rehearsing, and performance process? If so, in what ways?
- How would you describe this overall learning experience?

Interview questions for audience members

- In what ways was this concert experience different for you than other concerts?
- In what ways, if any, did you connect to the concert material and/or to the student performers?
- Was this concert relevant to you personally? If so, in what manner?
- Did you feel that student perspective and voice came through? If so, in what areas?
- Did you perceive that this concert had any type of impact on the student performers?
On the school community? On the surrounding city community?
- How would you describe your overall concert-going experience at this event?

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Curriculum Vitae

