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From inherited practices to imagined possibilities: teacher educator agency in American Orff-Schulwerk teacher education

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

Dissertation

**FROM INHERITED PRACTICES TO IMAGINED POSSIBILITIES:
TEACHER EDUCATOR AGENCY IN AMERICAN ORFF-SCHULWERK
TEACHER EDUCATION**

by

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Doctor of Musical Arts

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Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

(Freire, 2000, p. 72)

DEDICATION

To Kaj and Leif

For how you question, create, and care as you make sense of our world.

You inspire me to foster spaces where agency can flourish.

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DIANA KAY HAWLEY**

Boston University College of Fine Arts, 2025

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ABSTRACT

Orff Schulwerk teacher educators (TEs) occupy a unique position of influence in American music education, with over 100 TEs teaching nearly 1,400 teachers across 43 locations in 30 states during summer 2024. Unlike music teacher educators in higher education, most Orff Schulwerk TEs are practicing music educators who serve as TEs part-time under the auspices of the American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA). The purpose of this study was to explore how four TEs navigated the dynamic between tradition and innovation in their AOSA Teacher Education courses. Specifically, I examined how these TEs perceived and used their agency to serve as arbiters of tradition or instigators of change, and how their enactment of agency aligned or conflicted with AOSA's institutional aims.

I grounded both the study design and analysis in the overarching theoretical framework of ecological teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015). Priestley et al. conceptualized agency as emerging from the interplay between individual capacities and environmental affordances across three temporal dimensions: iterational (drawing from past experiences), practical-evaluative (responding to present circumstances), and

projective (working toward future possibilities). For example, the same AOSA curriculum guidelines might constrain one TE's sense of agency while enabling another's, depending on how each TE interprets these guidelines. Gay's (2018) six characteristics of culturally responsive teaching—validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory—and Wenger's (1999) communities of practice theory further informed the analysis.

I used a qualitative case study to examine teacher educator agency within AOSA's organizational context. The bounded case encompassed individual TEs and the institutional structures within which they operated, allowing for investigation of how personal capacities and environmental conditions interacted across contexts. Data collection included AOSA curriculum materials, semi-structured interviews with four purposefully selected TEs representing varied cultural perspectives and contexts, focus group discussions with the four TEs, and participant reflections spanning five months. This method enabled me to examine both individual experiences and group insights.

Three key findings emerged from this analysis: (1) The TEs in this study artfully integrated tradition and innovation in their own classrooms to foster culturally responsive teaching practices, (2) persistent cultural barriers impeded organization-wide cultural responsiveness, and (3) structured professional dialogue among TEs demonstrated transformative potential. The TEs in this study actively employed their agency to enact culturally responsive teaching practices rather than serving as either arbiters of tradition or instigators of change. Through the integration of traditional Orff Schulwerk principles with innovative adaptive strategies, these TEs illustrated how cultural responsiveness

enhanced rather than compromised a pedagogical tradition. However, despite organizational policy advancements toward inclusion, implicit social hierarchies within AOSA constrained TE agency and the system-wide implementation of culturally responsive teaching. This constraint took the form of credential gatekeeping, racial bias, and inequitable power structures. The focus group experience emerged as a powerful catalyst for agency development, providing a space where TEs could interrogate systemic concerns, challenge long-standing assumptions, and envision collaborative approaches to institutional change.

Based on these findings, I developed a framework integrating teacher agency and culturally responsive teaching, revealing how the temporal dimensions of agency—iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective—aligned with specific qualities of cultural responsiveness in this study. Through this integration, I proposed that culturally responsive teacher education requires educators to simultaneously draw upon past experiences, respond to present needs, and work toward inclusive futures. These findings revealed implications for professional learning communities as accelerators of teacher educator agency and point to organizational structures that support both individual and collective transformation in music education.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a profession that has long been considered a calling or vocation—an honorable career connected to a higher sense of purpose or service. However, teaching in the 21st century amidst rapidly changing conditions (e.g., artificial intelligence, divisive concept laws, neoliberal influences, climate change, post-pandemic educational shifts) requires adaptive teachers who can both leverage established pedagogical traditions and attune to the changing landscape of student needs. To effectively navigate these complex and evolving educational environments, teachers must consider both foundational pedagogical wisdom and innovative approaches in response to contemporary challenges.

Allsup (2015) defined music teacher quality as “the ability to move skillfully and knowingly within and across traditional and neoteric domains” (p. 6). This movement between tradition and innovation requires *agency*—seeing what options are available, given the constraints and affordances of a particular situation, and deciding next steps with conviction and intention. Notably, agentic teachers are both born and made. Their individual dispositions, histories, and experiences shape them, while interactions in professional communities strengthen their capacities. As such, teacher agency is not a fixed capacity but rather a reflection of the interplay between a teacher’s attributes and their environment (Priestley et al., 2015). Teacher agency thus emerges from the confluence of personal capacity and environmental opportunity.

Those who prepare teachers for today's classrooms must also navigate the interplay between tradition and innovation in their own practice—a navigation that requires agency. Teacher educators (TEs) tasked with facilitating the professional

learning of teachers must themselves embody the agency they hope to cultivate in their students. Drawing on Barrett's (2020) interpretation of Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological view of agency, this means TEs must demonstrate “the power to choose, to create, and especially to move forward with keen attention toward openings that enable curricular initiative while thoughtfully navigating around potential barriers to desired intentions” (p. 39). By modeling this balance—leveraging established pedagogical traditions while responding to evolving student needs—TEs foster learning environments where future teachers can develop their own agentic capacities.

In practice, Allsup (2015) envisioned this expertise as “both creative in character and respectful of traditional forms, a vision that can be implemented in changing conditions” (p. 6). Activating agency might involve helping teachers (or TEs) talk about it (Tucker, 2020), process it collectively, and recognize their power to shape individual practice and institutional structures with a sense of courageous empowerment. Freire (2000) wrote about the role of the teacher to help students achieve conscientization—essentially to activate their agency. Although conscientization begins as an individual awakening, it often flourishes through collective action and mutual support. By coming together in communities of practice (Wenger, 1999), TEs can collectively develop strategies to navigate pedagogical and structural tensions, shaping conditions that support individual, collective, and organizational transformation.

Informed by this body of knowledge, I positioned my research within the tradition-innovation dialogue. Drawing on this dialogue alongside scholarship in teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018), and

communities of practice (Wenger, 1999), I designed a study to examine how four TEs navigated the dynamic between tradition and innovation within American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA) Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education. As an AOSA TE myself, I sought to explore two interconnected aspects: how the TEs in this study navigated AOSA's organizational structures and uncovering how the organization may have been supporting or constraining their TE agency. Through curriculum policy analysis and conversations with TEs, both individually and as a focus group, I sought to understand how TEs balanced tradition with innovation and how institutional structures within AOSA either enabled or constrained TE efforts to develop more culturally responsive approaches to teacher education.

This chapter continues with my personal narrative, contextualizing this inquiry within my own professional journey and motivations. Then, I describe AOSA's educational context and teacher education program, present the study's problem statement and purpose, and outline the theoretical framework and research questions. Finally, I conclude with an overview of the study's methodological approach and the organization of chapters that follow.

Narrative Background

I took an indirect path to becoming a music teacher. Though a music education major for most of my college years, I pivoted abruptly my junior year when I experienced dissonance between a traditional, competition-focused music education paradigm and my growing awareness of the need for more inclusive approaches. The gatekeeping structures I encountered—what I perceived at the time as prescriptive methods classes, an emphasis

on technical excellence over cultural relevance, and limited opportunities to explore alternative pedagogies—led me to question my place in the profession. Rather than conform to these established pathways, I graduated with a BA in Music and Sociology/Anthropology, grateful that I had ventured beyond the music building to expand my understanding of how culture, education, and society intersect.

This broader perspective served me well when I accepted a position as a paraprofessional at a St. Paul charter school serving Hmong and Spanish-speaking communities. When invited to start a school music program, I discovered the challenge of drawing from familiar music education practices while responding authentically to the students before me. Working in this context revealed the limitations of my traditional training, yet “my mind lit up with pedagogical possibilities” (Hawley, 2024, p. 31). As I embraced the identity of ‘general music teacher,’ I began to envision a space where I could build a vocation aligned with both artistry and inclusivity.

However, the challenges were substantial. Despite my dedication and commitment to responsive teaching, I needed guidance in translating the strong relationships I had with my students into meaningful music-making experiences in the classroom. At this critical juncture, I discovered Orff Schulwerk—an approach that would help me facilitate the kind of engaging musical experiences my students deserved. Orff Schulwerk’s emphasis on improvisation and creativity provided a philosophical and pragmatic foundation that prepared me to “move skillfully and knowingly within and across traditional and neoteric domains” (Allsup, 2015, p. 6).

Orff Schulwerk

I developed this mini vignette based upon my experiences using the Orff Schulwerk approach in the music classroom to exemplify Orff Schulwerk in action:

The classroom buzzes with energy as twenty-eight fourth graders stand in a loose circle, bodies swaying to an internalized pulse. The teacher introduces a simple four-beat pattern, first speaking it—“float, fall, float”—their hands gesturing in front of them to indicate pitch levels. The students echo, voices united. While sustaining the collective pulse, the teacher then introduces body percussion, and students transfer the spoken pattern into a rhythmic chant with claps and pats. Without pausing, the teacher guides several students to xylophones where they translate the pattern into a melodic motive, while others maintain the rhythmic foundation with hand drums. Two students spontaneously rise, interpreting the emerging melody through movement. What began as a simple idea evolved organically into a multi-layered, collaborative musical encounter. When one student offers a variation—“float, float, fall”—the teacher smiles and incorporates it, demonstrating the approach's central commitment to honoring children's input. In this moment, music, speech, and movement merge into a unified expressive experience that transcends traditional boundaries between art forms.

This scene represents Orff Schulwerk in action—a pedagogical approach that has evolved substantially since its conception by composer Carl Orff and dancer Gunild Keetman in post-World War II Germany. Rooted in the unity of dance, music, and

language (Abril & Gault, 2016), this approach stands out among music education methods for its unique integration of multiple art forms, collaborative work between dancers and musicians, and strong focus on rhythm as a fundamental element (Young, 2024). Although many standardized music education methods emphasize technique or notation, Orff Schulwerk distinguishes itself through what Orff himself described as “never music alone but [in] unity with movement, dance and speech” (Orff, 1977, p. 6). This integrated artistic experience reflects a fundamentally different conception of music education, one where expressive boundaries between art forms are intentionally blurred.

At its core, Orff Schulwerk foregrounds improvisation as its animating principle. McNeil Carley (1977) captured this essence, noting that improvisation lies “at the heart of the Orff approach,” permeating speech, song, movement, and instrumental play, and indeed “in the art of teaching as well” (p. 81). Reflecting pedagogical shifts of the era that challenged talent-based approaches, Orff Schulwerk was founded on the belief that musical creativity and imaginative potential are innate in all children, not a specialized talent of the few, and can be cultivated through experiences that honor student voice while providing supportive frameworks for exploration. This philosophy is reflected in the American Orff-Schulwerk Association's stated purpose: “to awaken the artistic potential in every individual and offer a context in which this can be exercised” (AOSA, 2024, p. 4).

Beyond musical outcomes, practitioners argue that Orff Schulwerk develops capacities extending beyond the artistic into intellectual, social, emotional, and aesthetic domains (AOSA, 2024). The collaborative nature of an Orff ensemble fosters social

awareness as children negotiate the relationship between individual expression and group cohesion. Critical thinking emerges naturally as students develop, adapt, and refine musical ideas. The approach provides expressive outlets that support emotional development, a particularly important consideration in contemporary educational contexts where children face unprecedented social pressures. The American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA) sustains a comprehensive teacher education program through which educators can pursue multi-level certification, creating a community of practice centered around these pedagogical principles.

My Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education Experience

As I reflect on my own course participant experience in Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education, I recall the fluency with which the TEs facilitated music-making and music-creating experiences. Each TE brought not only their technical expertise, but also their unique cultural perspectives, teaching priorities, and approaches to making the material relevant for the teachers who showed up to learn. Their individual interpretations of the Orff Schulwerk tradition demonstrated how the approach could be both grounded in foundational principles while yet flexible enough to accommodate changing educational needs.

While experiencing teacher education courses as a participant —“Levels,” as they are called in the AOSA community—my mind and body soaked up the strategies, which satiated my thirst for tangible supports and structures. I did not yet have the experience to pick up on some of the nuances or subtleties that my talented TEs infused in their personal approaches—the stories they told, the pauses in the action to illuminate

something of interest, the moments to posit or preach, leaning into a project or letting it go. As a young teacher, I lacked the conceptual schema to contextualize these practices beyond simply labeling them superficially as “Orff process.” Yet the experience was deeply immersive and fostered a sense of community and belonging that shaped my teaching identity. Only later, through deep and extended reflection, did I begin to recognize how my TEs had exercised agency in subtle but meaningful ways: through their choice of materials, their contextualizing stories, their moments of divergence from traditional sequences to address emergent student needs. These choices were not just technical teaching decisions, but reflections of how they navigated between traditional Orff Schulwerk practices and innovative adaptations to meet the needs of the teachers in front of them.

The experience was transformative not just for its pedagogical content, but for how it revealed the possibility of working within an established framework while thoughtfully adapting it to meet contemporary needs. Through the TEs' example, I began to understand how an educational approach could maintain its core principles while simultaneously being inclusive and culturally responsive. The community I found was not just bound by shared techniques, but by a collective commitment to sustaining a vibrant, relevant Orff Schulwerk for all learners.

Discovering Ecological Teacher Agency

During my doctoral studies at Boston University, I became deeply interested in the intersections of music education and professional development, curriculum, and policy. Encountering Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological approach to teacher agency

proved pivotal to my thinking. This theoretical framework resonated powerfully with my understanding of how teachers navigate their complex professional environments. The ecological approach captures how teachers perceive their agency depending on their conditions, offering a powerful lens for examining how teachers might feel either supported or constrained in different environments.

As I considered ways to bring these threads together—professional development, curriculum, and policy—my focus naturally turned to Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education, a program that has activated my own sense of agency throughout my career, both as a participant and now as a TE. This study emerged from deep personal and professional interests in contributing meaningful insights to a community that has profoundly influenced my development as both a teacher and teacher educator. My journey from course participant to TE has given me a unique perspective on the systemic tensions within AOSA that this study aims to investigate.

Background of the Problem

Before I offer the statement of the problem for the reader, I first provide background information on the American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA) to provide context. This background will focus on AOSA's teacher education program, its organizational structure, and the role of teacher educators (TEs) within the association. By examining these components, readers will better understand the tension between preserving traditional Orff Schulwerk practices and adapting to current educational needs that forms the basis of the problem statement that follows.

American Orff-Schulwerk Association

The American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA) is a professional organization of educators dedicated to the creative music and movement approach developed by Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman (AOSA, 2024). Established in 1968 by a group of ten music educators who valued the promise of Orff Schulwerk pedagogy, the organization was created to channel the growing enthusiasm for this approach as it gained popularity throughout the United States and to encourage its adoption within American music education programs (AOSA, 2024).

From its initial 300 members in the first year, AOSA has grown to over 3,000 members (AOSA, 2024). The organization articulates its aims through a three-part mission statement: (1) to demonstrate the value of Orff Schulwerk and promote its widespread use, (2) to support the professional development of our members, and (3) to inspire and advocate for the creative potential of all learners. Through its network of 96 local chapters AOSA provides professional development opportunities and supports members through two publications: *Reverberations*, a weekly online resource focused on teaching strategies and classroom applications, and *The Orff Echo*, the organization's peer-reviewed quarterly journal.

AOSA Teacher Education

AOSA Teacher Education, the setting of this study, prepares teachers to implement Orff Schulwerk materials and procedures in educational settings (AOSA, 2025). The certification process involves three 10-day intensive courses completed over a minimum of three years. During “Levels” courses, teachers experience active, embodied

model lessons that simulate classroom instruction while developing conceptual, musical, and pedagogical understanding through basic pedagogy, recorder, and movement instruction.

AOSA provides detailed curriculum guidelines that outline the conceptual, musical, and pedagogical understandings that are addressed in each of the three levels of OS teacher education in basic pedagogy, recorder, and movement (AOSA, 2024). Central to these guidelines is an emphasis on the “Volumes”—the five-volume collection of pedagogical materials developed by Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman and adapted into English by Margaret Murray (1958–66). The curriculum (AOSA, 2024) notes that TEs should utilize a variety of materials including original source materials such as the *Orff-Schulwerk: Music for Children, Volumes I–V* plus “high quality works across all genres of music, including but not limited to jazz, blues, rock, pop, classical, and a variety of folk, traditional, world, non-western, and contemporary music” (p. 3), reflecting the organization's commitment to balancing traditional Orff Schulwerk pedagogy with evolving educational priorities and values.

In recent years, AOSA has undertaken several initiatives to address equity and inclusion within its teacher education program. The organization has implemented annual equity reviews of teaching materials, established processes for removing problematic content from its curriculum, and worked to make the TE selection process more transparent and accessible (AOSA, 2024). However, these institutional changes exist within long-established organizational hierarchies that continue to influence how power and decision-making authority are distributed within AOSA.

AOSA Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education represents a notable model of specialized professional development (PD) in music education. Music teachers, who often feel isolated in their school settings and find limited relevance in building-level PD (Bautista et al., 2021), frequently turn to organizations like AOSA to meet their professional learning needs. These opt-in certification courses, similar to other specialized approaches like Kodály or World Music Pedagogy, attract teachers who invest their own time and resources in summer study.

The program's structure aligns with established principles of effective PD (Desimone, 2009; Koner & Eros, 2019; West et al., 2021). AOSA's multi-year certification model reflects established best practices in PD, particularly in its emphasis on sustained learning, differentiation by experience, and iterative feedback. This extended timeframe not only supports deep learning but also allows teachers to gradually introduce and personalize Orff Schulwerk practices into their classrooms. The program incorporates research-supported practices including collaboration (Stanley et al., 2014), collective music-making (Pellegrino, 2011), and peer observation (Bautista & Wong, 2019). Teachers engage at different career stages (Eros, 2011), with AOSA policy requiring at least one year between each level to allow time for personal processing and classroom implementation.

AOSA's dual mission directly embodies the tension within its teacher education program. Although the organization aims “to support the professional development of our members” and “to inspire and advocate for the creative potential of all learners,” the goal listed first is “to demonstrate the value of Orff Schulwerk and promote its widespread

use” (AOSA, 2024). The intersection of effective PD and organizational sustainability remains largely unexplored in the literature.

AOSA Teacher Educators. Orff-Schulwerk TEs play a crucial role in American music education, providing professional development through AOSA-sanctioned courses. According to the AOSA Professional Development Director (K. Benson, personal communication, June 7, 2025), during summer 2024 over 100 TEs taught nearly 1,400 teachers across 43 courses in 30 states. Unlike music TEs in higher education settings, most Orff-Schulwerk TEs are practicing music teachers who serve as TEs on a part-time basis.

Becoming An AOSA Teacher Educator. The process of becoming an AOSA TE involves a rigorous application process and ongoing oversight. Prospective TEs must submit a portfolio including personal statements, arrangements in an elemental style, and teaching videos demonstrating work with both children and adults. Successful candidates then complete a two-week apprenticeship with a practicing Level I TE. Once approved, TEs must renew their certification every four years.

TEs develop detailed scope-and-sequence grids outlining their implementation of curriculum standards and their selection of materials across the 10-day course. Although the AOSA curriculum provides example materials, TEs maintain substantial autonomy in designing learning experiences, selecting repertoire, and incorporating culturally responsive pedagogies. This balance between organizational guidelines and individual agency places TEs at the critical intersection of tradition and innovation.

The certification process has revealed complex power dynamics within AOSA.

Although formal application procedures support objectivity through portfolio reviews and apprenticeships, implicit social hierarchies and established networks can influence access to these roles. Recent scholarship has examined various aspects of AOSA Teacher Education, including program development (Brandon, 2013; Klossner, 2018), pedagogical lineages (Taranto, 2010), notable leaders (Kupinski, 2023), and TE beliefs and practices (Scott, 2010; Hersey, 2019). This body of research situates AOSA Teacher Education within broader discussions of music teacher professional development (Johnson et al., 2019; Stanley, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

Music education scholars recognize a need for more resonant professional learning opportunities for music educators (Koner & Eros, 2019; West et al., 2021), particularly in settings where teachers feel isolated from other music educators in similar positions (Stanley et al., 2014). This need becomes more pressing as the field confronts changing student demographics and evolving educational priorities. It may be necessary for PD providers to balance traditional approaches with innovative practices to remain relevant and effective. Effective models can leverage the established wisdom of pedagogical traditions while giving facilitators flexibility to address current contexts.

Despite growing scholarship on policy and agency in K–12 music education contexts (Kos, 2018; Schmidt, 2020b), there remains a research gap regarding how TEs exercise agency within specialized educational programs like AOSA. By examining this understudied intersection, this research contributes to our understanding of how curriculum policies function not merely as constraints but as potential sites for

professional empowerment and organizational evolution through the mediating influence of teacher educator agency.

This challenge reflects a broader tension across music education, where established pedagogical approaches must evolve to address contemporary educational priorities, including culturally responsive teaching, equity, and inclusion. Traditional approaches to repertoire selection, assessment, ensemble structures, and teaching methodologies are being reevaluated in light of calls for more inclusive and culturally responsive music education (Hess, 2017; Shaw, 2020). The field is navigating this call for change.

In the case of the AOSA, this tension is particularly evident. The organization's three-part mission leads with “to demonstrate the value of Orff Schulwerk and promote its widespread use” (AOSA, 2025). Although AOSA has made institutional commitments to inclusive music education through equity reviews and curriculum updates, this emphasis on promoting and perpetuating the Orff approach potentially limits TE agency as they adapt teacher education curricula in response to participant needs. The experiences of TEs confronting these organizational and pedagogical challenges offer valuable insights into broader PD challenges in music education.

Understanding how TEs navigate competing demands is essential for developing more responsive PD models. Their experiences may reveal strategies that could benefit the broader field of music education. In this study, I examined the tradition-innovation dialectic and explored how TEs maintain pedagogical integrity while responding to contemporary educational needs. By investigating TEs' decision-making processes and

adaptive strategies, I aimed to contribute to more effective professional development models that honor traditions while embracing necessary innovation.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher educator agency in Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education. I explored: (a) how individual TEs navigate AOSA Teacher Education policies and practices in their roles as arbiters of tradition or agents of change, and (b) how organizational structures within AOSA either enable or constrain culturally responsive teaching practices.

I entered this study in the spirit of discovering what can be learned from TEs' experiences navigating both individual and systemic dimensions of change within professional development contexts. Although generalizing findings to other educational programs was not a primary goal, this investigation of how a group of TEs achieve agency within AOSA—both through individual action and collective professional networks—may offer insights for similar organizations working to identify and address institutional barriers to culturally responsive practice. This study contributes to broader discussions about teacher educator agency, professional learning communities, and the role of educational organizations in either fostering or impeding transformative pedagogical practices.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework Overview

In this study I used three complementary theoretical frameworks to examine teacher educator agency in AOSA Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education: ecological teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015) as the primary framework, supported by culturally

responsive teaching (Gay, 2018) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1999). Each framework contributed unique insights into how TEs navigated their roles within professional development contexts. Together, these frameworks provide multiple lenses through which to analyze the dynamics of teacher educator agency within organizational structures.

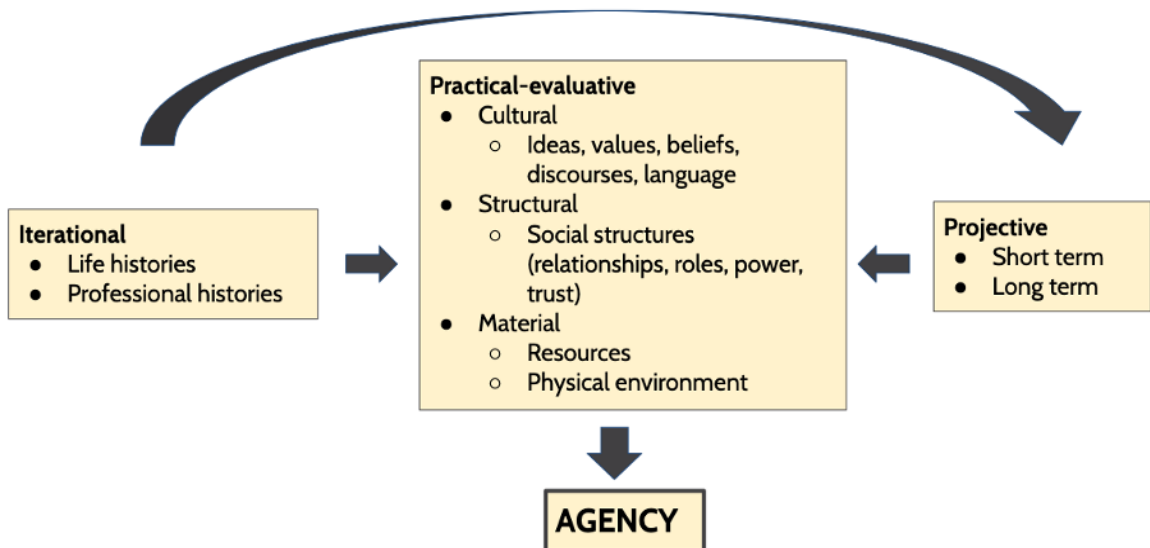
Although these frameworks originated from different scholarly traditions, they share compatible epistemological foundations that make their integration both logical and productive for this study. Priestley et al.'s ecological approach to teacher agency was selected over other agency frameworks, such as Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory or Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach, because its emphasis on agency as contextually achieved rather than individually possessed aligns with this study's examination of how organizational structures influence TE practice. Although ecological approaches emphasize contextual factors while culturally responsive pedagogies often foreground individual responsibility, both frameworks recognize the interplay between individual action and structural constraints. Similarly, communities of practice theory complements the ecological approach by illuminating how collective interactions shape individual agency within specific contexts. Together, these frameworks offer complementary rather than contradictory perspectives on how TEs navigate their professional environments.

The primary framework of ecological teacher agency guides my investigation of how TEs perceive and achieve agency in their teacher education practice. Priestley et al. (2015) conceptualized agency not as an individual capacity but as an achievement that emerges from “the interplay of personal capacities and the resources, affordances and

constraints of the environment by means of which individuals act” (p. 19). Building on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) chordal triad, this framework articulates three temporal dimensions: iterational (drawing on past experiences, beliefs, and values), projective (imagining possible futures), and practical-evaluative (navigating cultural, structural, and material factors in the present). A TE who perceives AOSA curriculum guidelines as fixed might experience constrained agency, while another might view these same guidelines as supportive resources, illustrating how agency achievement is both individual and contextual. As illustrated in Figure 1, the arrows between these dimensions indicate that agency is not static but rather emerges through ongoing interaction between past experiences, future aspirations, and present conditions.

Figure 1

Ecological Teacher Agency (Priestley et al., 2015)



As the study progressed, I noticed the need to expand beyond Priestley et al.’s agency framework to better support and contextualize unexpected patterns in the data. As

such, I incorporated the additional theoretical frameworks to support analysis. Gay's (2018) framework of culturally responsive teaching, with its six defining characteristics—validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory—provided analytical tools for examining how TEs honor diverse cultural knowledge while working to create more equitable learning environments. Wenger's (1999) communities of practice theory illuminated how TEs developed and exercised agency while in the dialogue space of the focus group. This framework helped conceptualize AOSA as a larger community of practice with its own shared repertoire, joint enterprise, and mutual engagement, while smaller groups within the organization represent nested communities where TEs negotiate meaning. These supporting frameworks expanded the analytical possibilities beyond individual agency to include both cultural and collective dimensions of TE practice. The integration of these frameworks revealed important insights that would not have been visible through any single perspective.

Research Questions

My inquiry centered around two primary research questions:

1. In what ways, if any, did the Orff Schulwerk TEs perceive and use their agency to serve as arbiters of tradition or instigators of change in AOSA Teacher Education?
2. In what ways, if any, did these TEs' achievement of agency align or conflict with the aims of the AOSA?

Methodological Overview

In this study I employed a qualitative research approach to investigate ecological teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015) in the organizational context of AOSA Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education. Qualitative methods were particularly appropriate given the study's focus on how TEs perceived their agency and navigated institutional contexts, as researchers can use this approach to understand how individuals interpret their experiences, explore complex interactions between people and their environments, and investigate phenomena with multiple variables that are difficult to isolate (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Over a five-month period, I engaged in dialogue with four AOSA TEs through multiple data collection methods: individual interviews, a focus group discussion, and participant journaling. Document analysis of AOSA curriculum policy documents provided foundational context for developing interview and focus group questions. This approach allowed for examination of both individual experiences and perspectives that emerged through dialogue for navigating between tradition and innovation within AOSA's institutional framework.

Orientation to the Study

I have organized this study into seven chapters. In chapter one, I provided a background on Orff Schulwerk and AOSA's organizational context, articulated the study's problem and purpose, presented the theoretical frameworks and research questions, and concluded with a methodological overview. In chapter two, I review literature examining three theoretical frameworks: ecological agency, culturally responsive pedagogies, and communities of practice, while also exploring policy in music

teacher education and the evolution of AOSA Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education. I outline case study methodology in chapter three, describing how I designed data collection and analysis methods to capture a comprehensive and cohesive picture of study participants' teacher educator agency.

In chapter four, I provide participant profiles and present an analysis of the AOSA Teacher Education Curriculum documents. I report key findings from interviews and the focus group in chapter five and interpret these findings in chapter six's discussion. Finally, in chapter seven, I conclude with implications and recommendations for future research. By investigating how the TEs in this study perceived their sense of agency within AOSA structures, this study offers insights not only for AOSA but for any educational organization seeking to sustain its pedagogical foundations while evolving to meet contemporary needs.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this study, I examined how teacher educators (TEs) in the American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA) navigated the pull between tradition and innovation. I investigated how TEs perceived and exercised their agency as they served as both stewards and innovators. I considered this tension between old and new particularly important at the time of this study, as music education confronted demands for greater cultural responsiveness.

The theoretical frameworks that ground this study span three interconnected domains: (1) *ecological teacher agency*, which I positioned as the primary theoretical framework, and which illuminated how TEs achieve agency within institutional structures; (2) *culturally responsive teaching*, which provided additional language for identifying possible motivations behind TE agency achievement; and (3) *communities of practice*, which revealed how collective engagement shapes agency development. Additionally, I reviewed relevant Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education materials to fully contextualize this study. However, before exploring these areas of the literature in depth, it is essential first to understand the unique dynamics between tradition and innovation that characterize methods-based music education programs like Orff Schulwerk. In the following section I explore these dynamics, providing critical context for the subsequent examination of teacher agency.

Tradition and Innovation in Methods-Based Education

Methods-based music education programs inherently embody tensions between tradition and innovation. Benedict (2016) offered a framework for examining the tension

in Orff Schulwerk teacher education through the concept of reading methods. She distinguished between “innocent” readings, which accept methodologies at face value as neutral teaching approaches, and “guilty” readings, which examine them as ideological texts shaped by historical and social contexts. Benedict argued that music teaching methods like Orff Schulwerk often become unquestioned authorities that position teachers as implementers rather than critical thinkers, noting that “the techniques [collections of devices] themselves are authoring the method” (Bennett, 1987, p. 39).

This critical perspective aligns with Sánchez-Gatt et al.’s (2025) anti-colonial framework that troubled transcultural practices in music education. The authors argued that when pedagogical approaches cross cultural boundaries without acknowledging power differentials, they can “essentialize culture, invisibilize logics that are incongruent to European, Canadian, and U.S.-centric epistemologies, and uphold the goal of white assimilation under the guise of multiculturalism” (p. 48). For Orff Schulwerk TEs, this raises important questions about how the methodology—originally developed in a European cultural context—has and continues to be transmitted and transformed in American educational settings.

Benedict and Schmidt’s (2014) concept of music educators as “cultural citizens” further illuminates this tension. The authors reasoned that music teacher education programs have historically emphasized performance skills and musicianship at the expense of preparing teachers to be “impactful agent[s] within the school or other learning communities, who can advocate, model, and make evident the realization of the cultural rights of school-age children and youth” (p. 77). This disconnect between

performance-based training and the actual demands of teaching creates what Benedict and Schmidt described as a position of “compromised citizenship,” where teachers’ “capacities for adaptive, unorthodox, and innovative thought and action are not fully encouraged” (p. 77). This concept of compromised citizenship offers an alternative way of understanding how the historical development of methodologies like Orff Schulwerk may have inadvertently limited teacher agency.

For Orff Schulwerk TEs, these perspectives suggest that achieving agency requires recognizing methodologies not as fixed, sacred traditions but as evolving approaches that can be critically examined. This challenges what Regelski (2002) termed “methodolatry,” the tendency toward uncritical acceptance of methods “coming close to the worship of religious idols” (Benedict, 2016, p. 364). Benedict and Schmidt (2014) proposed that teacher education should focus on developing what they call “epistemological agility” (p. 81), the ability to navigate multiple ways of knowing and being. This aligns with my research question about teacher agency, as Benedict and Schmidt argued that music teachers need to develop “a framing capacity” (p. 87) rather than merely being prepared with a set of prescribed techniques. Applied to Orff Schulwerk teacher education, these concepts suggest that TEs might activate or even reclaim their agency by questioning rather than simply transmitting traditions and balancing respect for the methodology’s origins with critical awareness of the power dynamics involved in its dissemination. As Benedict (2016) summarized, “Our challenge is to be open to readings that welcome new modes of production that call us to realize our human capacities; it is to be willing to read with guilt” (p. 364).

Ecological Teacher Agency

In the previous section, I summarized relevant music education literature about tradition and innovation in methods-based music education, highlighting the power dynamics that influence how methods like Orff Schulwerk are transmitted and transformed. To better understand these dynamics, I now revisit Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological teacher agency framework, which provides pragmatic theoretical tools for analyzing how TEs work within institutional constraints while attempting to initiate change. I begin by examining ecological teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015) and its recent applications in music education contexts (Powell, 2019; Spruce et al., 2021; Tucker, 2020).

Distinct from self-action conceptions of agency, where agency is situated within the individual (Tucker, 2022), ecological agency is a multidimensional, emergent phenomenon with relational and temporal elements (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Because “humans operate by means of their social and material environments,” an individual’s achievement of agency is shaped by the availability of relational resources (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 20). Relational resources for teachers might include a school culture that supports faculty dialogue and a school leader who provides spaces for sense-making around district initiatives through normed structures. Alternatively, school communities in which the power structure is largely hierarchical and relationships lack reciprocity may inhibit new thinking from being shared among teachers (Priestley et al., 2015).

In addition to being relationally informed, ecological agency is temporal. Priestley et al. (2015) described teacher agency's relationship with time—"agency is rooted in past experience, oriented to the future and located in the contingencies of the present" (p. 20). For example, a teacher's personal experience as a student in school may influence their beliefs, priorities, and capacity for imagining new possibilities.

To further explicate the relational and temporal elements of ecological agency, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) posited a 3-part *chordal triad of agency* with three distinct, time-related dimensions: iterative (past), projective (future), and practical-evaluative (present). This chordal triad of agency framework resonates with education scholars, who saw the value in disaggregating agency into past, present, and future orientations in order to better understand how teacher agency functions and to illuminate different ways to think about how teachers achieve agency in their unique contexts (Biesta et al., 2017; Priestley et al., 2015).

The iterational dimension of a teacher's work refers to an individual's personal capacity (skills and knowledge), beliefs (personal and professional), and values—essentially how their personal and professional histories inform how they interpret the present circumstances and imagine possibilities for the future (Priestley et al., 2015). The projective dimension of a teacher's work relates to their long- and short-term aspirations, or how teachers imagine future action. The practical-evaluative dimension of a teacher's work refers to how teacher agency is achieved in the here and now, in teachers' day-to-day actions in their school environments, making it important "not just to look at individuals and what they are able or not able to do but also at the cultures, structures and

relationships that shape the particular ecologies within which teachers work” (p. 3).

Because an ecological approach frames teacher agency as an emergent phenomenon—something that teachers *achieve*—some researchers outside of music education have employed the chordal triad of agency framework to investigate how teacher agency is achieved in different educational settings amidst particular ecological conditions (Nguyen et al., 2022; Wild et al., 2018). Although this ecological framework offers valuable insights into teacher agency broadly, examining its specific manifestations within music education contexts revealed unique considerations related to artistic and performance-based teaching.

Priestley et al.’s (2015) ecological teacher agency framework has become an increasingly common tool for anchoring studies within music education. Scholars have investigated teacher agency development in music teacher education (Tucker, 2020), music teacher practice (Powell, 2019; Tucker, 2022), and music teacher professional development (Spruce et al., 2021), with much of this agency literature reflecting the experiences of pre-service and novice teachers (Campbell et al., 2021; Powell, 2019; Thiessen & Barrett, 2002; Tucker & Powell, 2021). Scholars have also explored the connections between teacher agency and curriculum-making (Stavrou & O’Connell, 2022), pedagogical creativity (Abramo & Reynolds, 2015; Bylica & Bauman, 2022), and policy (Aguilar & Dye, 2019, Dockan, 2024; Schmidt, 2020a), which will be explored in the following sections.

Teacher Agency in Music Education

The ecological teacher agency framework provides a promising approach for understanding and supporting agency development in music education contexts (Tucker, 2020). According to Tucker, cultivating teacher agency may serve as a key toward inclusion and innovation aims in various music education settings, with support strategies spanning the temporal dimensions of agency—iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective. Although Tucker’s (2020) scholarship may be directed toward university TEs who focus on growing the agentic capacity of pre-service educators, the essence of these ideas transfers easily into my study, in which I consider the agency of music TEs themselves. Extending this research into specialized contexts like AOSA Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education requires examining specific recommendations for developing agency across temporal dimensions.

Critical reflection served as a foundational element for fostering iterative teacher agency, enabling teachers “to evaluate the practicality of their options in localized contexts” (Tucker, 2020, p. 32). This reflective practice proved essential for developing teacher agency, particularly when understood through Brookfield’s (2017) definition of critical reflection as “the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions” (p. 3). Meaningful approaches to foster critical reflection included activities like authoring a life narrative (Pellegrino, 2009; Zhao & Biesta, 2008).

Distinct from iterative agency’s focus on past experiences, developing projective agency requires visioning possibilities and relating to how teachers see themselves as

professionals (Tucker, 2020). Preservice teachers' lack of exposure and experience could stifle their imagination of different possible futures. To counter this limitation, providing examples of teachers exhibiting agency could expand educators' imagined options. As one approach, "introductions to innovative music educators, through stories and observations, may expand preservice teachers' imagined options for who they can be as ensemble teachers beyond their lived experiences" (Tucker, 2020, p. 33). Whereas projective agency focuses on envisioning future possibilities, practical-evaluative agency addresses how individuals navigate present challenges.

Practical-evaluative agency operates through three key processes—problematization, characterization, and deliberation—that serve as conceptual “umbrellas” for understanding how teachers navigate current problems in music education (Tucker, 2020, p. 28). Problematization occurs when teachers encounter specific difficulties or feelings of discomfort in everyday teaching situations where established practices might not have been applicable. The process of characterization involves connecting these challenging situations to previous experiences, mental frameworks, or principles. During deliberation, future-oriented thinking merges with present circumstances as teachers assess the feasibility of various options in relation to their broader goals and potential outcomes. Tucker's (2020) framing of problematization, characterization, and deliberation as conceptual “umbrellas” informed how I developed and adapted protocols for the focus group.

Collaborative professional dialogue, whether in established communities or temporary group settings, could function as an agency activator through the cognitive

dissonance that occurs encountering alternative approaches (Tucker, 2020). In Tucker's research, such interactions often led to "new learning and agency through the constructive development of teacher beliefs, professional discourses, and professional knowledge" (Tucker, 2020, p. 33). Effective professional learning communities that activate agency require democratic power structures, focus on real student outcomes rather than methods, and require adequate participation and commitment (Stanley, 2011; Tucker, 2020). This understanding of collaborative agency activation connects to Powell's (2019) examination of the structural factors that constrained or enabled novice teachers' exercise of agency in educational settings.

Research on structure and agency—the interplay between individual action and institutional constraints—draws from strong structuration theory (Stones, 2005), an extension and elaboration of Giddens' original structuration theory (1984), which posited that social structures both enable and constrain individual agency. In Powell's (2019) study, a tension existed between novice teachers' pre-constructed philosophies and the structural limitations that constrained their agential capacities in educational settings. These pre-constructed philosophies, shaped by childhood experiences, university education, and influential others, often clashed with institutional structures in universities and P-12 schools.

Powell's (2019) research examined how the structures of music teaching within public schools in the U.S. enabled and inhibited the agency of novice music teachers while exploring how the practices of novice music teachers reproduced, sustained, and changed the structures of music education. Student teachers often experienced adhesion

to existing structures, reporting feeling like parts of a rigid system rather than agents with free will (Powell, 2019). In some ways, the structure of music teaching contexts was shaped and constrained by the agency of the cooperating teacher. Limiting student teacher agency may not have been the intention of the cooperating teacher, yet they too participated in structures “shaped by a production-focused, highly-competitive atmosphere” (p. 212). This “adhesion” (Freire, 2000) to the existing structure was not surprising, as that is what they had experienced and had reinforced. These structures provided “comforting rules and limiting options” (p. 214), making it understandable that some structures seemed inherent or “irresistible” (e.g., the level of competitiveness or amount of autonomy provided to novice teachers). However, Powell (2019) noted, although these challenges appeared overwhelming, they could have been addressed successfully.

Addressing structural constraints on teacher agency requires problem-posing dialogue, reframing mentoring relationships, and freedom from standardized conceptions that ignore contextual differences (Powell, 2019). First, Powell recommended, mentor teachers should engage in problem-posing dialogue with student teachers to facilitate critical reflection on the “structure/agency present” within their teaching contexts (p. 216). Second, reframing cooperating teachers as music TEs has the potential to encourage those in that role to invest more deeply in mentoring preservice music teachers. Finally, music education needs to move away from standardized approaches and toward contextually responsive practices that honor local differences (Powell, 2019).

Dialogic approaches to teacher education, combined with historical understanding

of pedagogical practices, empower educators to critically evaluate and adapt established methods rather than implementing them prescriptively (Powell, 2019). This approach recognizes that “prescribing the parameters of change would be simply replacing one restrictive structure with another” (Powell, 2019, p. 215). Drawing upon Freire’s (2000) work, teacher educators “must not explain to, but dialogue with teachers” (Powell, 2019, p. 215). This dialogic approach works in tandem with historical understanding, recognizing that “novice teachers needed to know the history of the development of teaching practices, and the unintended, sometimes negative, outcomes of such structures” (p. 215). Providing pre-service teachers with the historical context knowledge equips them to critically evaluate established practices. Specifically, in Orff Schulwerk teacher education, understanding the philosophical foundations and evolutionary trajectory of Orff Schulwerk has the potential to support educators to make informed decisions about how to adapt the pedagogical approach for their classroom environment rather than implement Orff Schulwerk as a prescriptive method.

Research on teacher agency has evolved from examining general structural factors to investigating specialized contexts like high-stakes performance environments, revealing how specific organizational pressures shape educators’ decision-making capacity (Tucker, 2022). Both Tucker’s research and my own study employed Priestley et al.’s ecological teacher agency framework (2015), yet our methodological approaches differed in some ways. Whereas Tucker collected data through interviews, observations, and document review, my study substituted focus group discussions for observations.

Music education organizations influence teacher agency by shaping cultural

direction and values, often creating symbiotic relationships that potentially narrow curriculum choices and limit pedagogical flexibility (Tucker, 2022). Tucker reported that organizations like the Texas Music Educators Association (TMEA) and University Interscholastic League (UIL) reinforced band teacher prioritization of performance preparation over other aspects of music education. In effect, the pressure to earn high ratings in competitions narrowed teacher perception of curriculum choices and limited teachers' capacities to incorporate varied musical experiences, like composition or improvisation, in their classrooms. Instead, band teachers in high-stakes environments tended to follow six common norms: homogeneous beginner classes, auditioned band hierarchies, mandatory rehearsals outside school hours, extensive preparation for competitions, private lessons, and individual performance assessments.

In Tucker's (2022) study, teacher agency operated on a spectrum from reproductive (maintaining traditional structures) to generative (creating new approaches), with most educators demonstrating primarily reproductive agency in established organizational contexts. This finding revealed that, for the teachers in this study, the established organizations profoundly shaped their teacher agency. As a result, Tucker (2022) suggested, "comprehensive visions of change in school music (e.g., Allsup, 2012; Kratus, 2007) must include structural changes in professional organizations and policies to support music educators' agency" (p. 165). According to Tucker's work, meaningful reform in music education requires structural changes in professional organizations and policies rather than relying solely on individual teachers to make changes at the classroom level.

Generative agency often emerged when educators encountered systemic barriers that conflicted with their personal values, activating innovation through value-driven tension rather than conformity to normative practices (Tucker, 2022). For example, a rural teacher who could not participate successfully in competitive jazz events instead created a non-competitive jazz festival that better served their community's values and students' needs. Their innovation emerged precisely because they could not follow the normative path and found meaning in connecting to their community's values instead. My study extended this understanding by considering how AOSA Teacher Education could potentially dedicate spaces for generative agency to develop while supporting reproductive agency that leverages the core philosophical traditions of the Orff Schulwerk approach.

This focus on creating spaces for generative agency connects to broader research on PD. PD design influences teacher capacity, autonomy, and agency, with some approaches constraining rather than strengthening educator voice and participation (Spruce et al., 2021). In Spruce et al.'s (2021) study, the structures through which teachers engaged in professional learning influenced to what extent teachers acted agentically. Understanding this relationship could help facilitators design more meaningful PD where “music teachers are able to engage in the discourses of music education” (p. 65). My investigation is built on this understanding.

Professional learning spaces that support teacher agency require three key characteristics: opportunities for reflexive discourse, place-based learning connected to teachers' own contexts, and connections between practitioners and scholarship (Spruce et

al., 2021). This research suggested effective PD should: build policy from student needs and experiences, then teacher needs; empower teachers to reclaim authority over defining teacher learning; and enable personalized professional learning plans rather than mandatory trainings. Though not job-embedded, AOSA Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education represents a resonant PD model that—evidenced by its longevity and popularity—continued to meet teachers' wants, needs, and experiences.

Policy in Music Teacher Education

In this study, curriculum policy represented a critical domain where teacher agency was both constrained and activated, as curriculum functions as both a guiding framework and site of professional negotiation. As part of this study, I examined how AOSA curriculum policies influenced and were influenced by TEs. The AOSA Teacher Education program presented a rich context for this investigation, with its distinctive set of formal policy texts (AOSA Teacher Education Curriculum) and varied policy practices (how TEs implemented these standards in their specific contexts).

The concept of curriculum as policy is multifaceted and has evolved substantially in music education scholarship. Recent scholars have advocated for more inclusive and active conceptions of policy (Richerme, 2019; Schmidt, 2017). Schmidt (2017) emphasized that policy could manifest as “formal or informal, obvious or subtle, soft or hard, implicit or explicit” (p. 12). In the context of curriculum, this meant understanding curriculum not merely as documents outlining content expectations, but as an interplay between curriculum policy texts and curriculum policy actions. As Kos (2018) demonstrated, understanding this interplay empowers teachers to influence and

implement such policies in ways that strengthen their programs. Curriculum policy is actively shaped by teachers as they navigated the structures and practices of their educational settings (Schmidt, 2020b). Like teacher agency, curriculum policy is complex and dynamic, existing in the space between formal documents and lived classroom experiences.

The multidimensionality of these curriculum policy conceptions aligns closely with Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological approach to teacher agency. This ecological perspective recognizes teachers not merely as curriculum recipients but as curriculum makers within their spheres of influence. Within AOSA, this showed up as TEs addressing curriculum standards in ways that met the various needs of adult learners while maintaining fidelity to core Orff Schulwerk principles. This perspective emphasizes the interconnected relationship between curriculum policy and teacher agency.

Engaging with curriculum policy work is formative in fostering the agentic capacity of music teachers (Abramo & Schmidt, 2019; Barrett, 2020; Bylica & Schmidt, 2024; Schmidt 2020b). In the subsections that follow, I review literature in which scholars have investigated ecological agency within curriculum policy contexts. By examining these topics in music education curriculum research, I hope to better articulate where my study is positioned at the intersection of music education policy, curriculum design, and professional development.

Policy Dispositions and Teacher Agency

A well-developed policy disposition can enhance teacher agency in educational settings. Schmidt (2020b) conceptualized this disposition as *policy knowhow*—"a disposition and a capacity to understand, speak, and act with a policy frame of mind that is relevant to teachers, their programs, and their work" (p. 11). Additionally, Richerme (2019) suggested engaging in policy work can serve as an agency activator. As Helton and Delfing (2023) noted, when teachers recognize themselves as policymakers, they become empowered to create meaningful change in local contexts. Schmidt (2020b) emphasized that a policy disposition strengthens leadership capacity and serves as a catalyst for sustainable curricular, pedagogical, and ethical development. By fostering this disposition, teachers develop the ability to create policymaking spaces where, as Schmidt (2020b) noted, their educational vision can be enacted.

Building Policymaking Spaces

A policy disposition supports teachers as they draw connections between their classroom environments and matters that extend beyond the classroom walls. Considering Giroux's concept of *border crossing pedagogy* (2005), Bylica and Schmidt (2024) suggested that teachers activate their agency as they 'bend borders' in their classrooms and come to see themselves as change agents within larger school ecologies. Schmidt (2015) noted, "meaningful and sustainable ways to approach such questions depend, to a quite large extent, on policy awareness, savvy, and action" (p. 56). Schmidt suggested teachers must pursue big questions, such as the implementation of

representative and inclusive practices, not just as passive conversation prompts, in order to drive action.

If engaging in discourse builds knowledge and broadens perspectives, policy as action is what brings about change. Teachers activate their practical-evaluative agency when they engage in policy work with their colleagues at the school level (Shieh, 2021). Because policy is a social endeavor—policy is relational—Shieh (2020) suggested the first step might be “to bring policy into our conversations with others” (p. 36). Collaborative policy inquiry is a particularly valuable possibility (Shieh, 2021). And because policy and school reform work is iterative, professional learning experiences should be framed as cyclical events (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020, p. 11). Rivera Maulucci et al. (2015) suggested:

In designing professional development experiences, it is important to explore where teachers are situated on the continuum between structurally reproductive and structurally transformative agency, the varied levels of power they may have to make change, the significance of the changes for teachers and students, and the particular historical and contextual circumstances that might make possible structurally transformative agency. (p. 558)

As music teachers become more savvy policy practitioners, they develop strong communication and rapport with stakeholders (Conway & Hibbard, 2018) and connect the work on the classroom to the larger school ecologies (Bylica & Schmidt, 2024). Agentic teachers navigate site-specific barriers as they engage in policy to implement change.

Navigating Site-Specific Barriers

Developing policy knowhow and building policymaking spaces support teacher agency by providing mindsets and tools for navigating challenges specific to a teacher's unique setting. To navigate context-specific challenges, Abramo and Schmidt (2019) suggested teachers might come to think of policy as an "alternative conceptualization of influence" (p. 24). Barrett (2020) noted that as agentic, policy-minded teachers develop influence in their unique settings, they will come across "advocates and alliances as well as pockets of resistance as they build strategic awareness of the steps, processes, and systems of approval" (p. 39). Agentic teachers know their settings and understand how to leverage their influence to work toward improving the student experience.

Because acquiring site-based knowledge and influence of a particular setting requires time and space, participating in professional learning that considers teachers' contexts (schools, communities, neighborhoods) is particularly meaningful (Bautista & Wong, 2019). Conway and Hibbard (2018) argued professional learning should include the investigation of power relations in schools as teachers learn to navigate the unique micropolitical landscapes in their specific schools. Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) suggested, "learning how to deal with these inevitable micropolitical aspects of their work lives constitutes an important dimension in teachers' professional development and needs to be included in any appropriate theory on teacher development (p. 755). In addition to investigating power relations and learning to navigate the micropolitics of teaching, teachers might benefit from framing curriculum sensemaking as policy work.

Curriculum Policy

Music teachers act with agency when they engage with curriculum as a dynamic process rather than a static plan (Bylica & Bauman, 2022; Stavrou & O’Connell, 2022). To engage with curriculum as a dynamic process, teachers need time to make sense of curriculum policy texts and then consider how they might interpret directives into meaningful experiences for students. This curriculum sense-making requires guidance rather than interpretation from professional learning facilitators. Providing wholesale interpretation potentially “deteriorates teacher professionalism, erodes their capacity to make professional judgments and ultimately denies them agency” (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 158). Independent or small-group sense-making of curriculum is an important component of professional learning for agency.

Without guidance, teachers are at risk of seeing curriculum work as planning opportunities to “tick off” a list rather than an opportunity to engage in a holistic conversation about the student experience over time (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 106). Moving away from the blind implementation of packaged and delivered curricula to a more philosophically informed approach requires teachers to be open to the uneasiness that comes with experimenting with different approaches (Stavrou & O’Connell, 2022). Guidance might look like assisting teachers by drawing deeper connections to the core principles and purposes of the curriculum (Priestley et al., 2015). Agentic curriculum making requires guided but not overly prescribed facilitation for sense-making in curriculum development, providing opportunities for pedagogical creativity to flourish.

Pedagogical Creativity

Teachers who achieve agency employ pedagogical creativity (Abramo & Reynolds, 2015; Bylica & Bauman, 2022). Abramo and Reynolds (2015) developed a framework based on the dispositions and core practices of teachers who exhibit pedagogical creativity. Their framework identified four distinct traits, suggesting creative pedagogues “(a) are responsive, flexible, and improvisatory; (b) are comfortable with ambiguity; (c) think metaphorically and juxtapose seemingly incongruent and novel ideas in new and interesting ways; and (d) acknowledge and use fluid and flexible identities” (p. 38).

Building on Abramo and Reynolds’s work, Bylica and Bauman (2022) conceptualized pedagogical creativity as “an opportunity to develop capacities and to construct a sense of pedagogical agency that is not dependent on institutionalized traditions or scripted curricula” (p. 8). As pedagogical creativity is both context-specific and ecologically informed (Bylica & Bauman, 2022), a teacher might achieve both pedagogical creativity and teacher agency when customizing learning activities with a specific students and conditions in mind.

Because Abramo and Reynolds's framework could be interpreted as a set of individual capacities, Bylica and Bauman (2022) provided an important distinction for the purposes of exploring pedagogical creativity and agency. To be clear, as with agency, a teacher does not simply bring pedagogical creativity to the table; instead, it is the interplay between personal and environmental conditions that allow a teacher's pedagogical creativity to either flourish or wane. Although Orff Schulwerk has long been

described as a creative pedagogical approach, critiques have emerged that challenge its association with pedagogical creativity, which will be explored further in the AOSA Teacher Education section of the literature review.

This complex relationship between individual capacity and environmental affordances also appears when examining how teachers develop culturally responsive practices. Whereas Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological framework illuminates how agency develops through past experiences, present contexts, and future aspirations, Gay's (2018) six qualities of culturally responsive teaching provides language to describe how this agency manifests through culturally responsive practices. Just as scholars examined how teacher agency intersects with pedagogical creativity (Bylica & Bauman, 2022), this study examined how teacher agency intersects with the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching.

Culturally Responsive Teaching as a Lens for Teacher Educator Agency

Gay's (2018) six qualities of culturally responsive teaching align meaningfully with the temporal dimensions of teacher agency. Each quality engages with different aspects of how teachers navigate between past, present, and future orientations in their practice. Examining each quality in relation to the temporal dimensions reveals how cultural responsiveness and agency achievement are deeply intertwined in practice.

Validating

Operating across both iterative and practical-evaluative dimensions, validating (in the context of culturally responsive teaching) requires educators to draw upon their accumulated cultural knowledge while actively affirming varied student experiences in

the present moment. Challenging the centrality of Western art music in educational settings, Bond (2017) called educators to critically examine how their past experiences shaped their current assumptions and to intentionally create space for multiple ways of knowing and making music. The act of validating becomes particularly evident when teachers recognize and honor the musical traditions that participants bring to the learning environment, creating bridges between their prior knowledge and new understandings. Importantly, Kelly-McHale and Abril (2015) suggested “this can only occur when music educators are taught how to see their students as individuals” (p. 167).

Comprehensive

Being comprehensive in culturally responsive teaching may relate most directly to the practical-evaluative dimension of agency, as educators develop what Kelly-McHale (2019) described as cultural competence—knowing students' current needs while responding to present circumstances. Yet it also involves the projective dimension as teachers plan for inclusive future environments that honor students' goals and aspirations. Comprehensive approaches require educators to consider the whole student, addressing intellectual, social, emotional, and cultural aspects of learning while creating spaces where multiple musical traditions can thrive simultaneously.

Multidimensional

The multidimensional nature of culturally responsive teaching exemplifies the practical-evaluative dimension of agency, requiring educators to navigate complex intersections of culture, power, and pedagogy in real time. Teachers demonstrate this

quality when they integrate multiple pedagogical approaches, assessment strategies, and content sources that collectively honor the richness of diverse musical traditions and learning styles. Johnson et al. (2019) supported this multidimensional approach by advocating for “reflective, differentiated, and teacher-generated approaches” to professional development that emerge from educators' expertise and relevant research literature.

Empowering

Bridging practical-evaluative and projective dimensions, the empowering quality of culturally responsive teaching focuses on both immediate capacity building and future barrier removal. Empowerment manifests when teachers create conditions where students develop both competence and confidence in their learning. Stanley's (2011) research on collaborative teacher study groups demonstrated how supportive professional spaces empower educators to recognize and validate their own collective expertise, rather than relying solely on an external authority to describe professional growth.

Transformative

The transformative quality of culturally responsive teaching engages the projective dimension as educators envision and work toward systemic change. As Hess (2019) argued, this requires challenging colonial practices and centering multiple musical knowledge systems while examining how past practices inform future possibilities. Within teacher education contexts, transformation occurs when educators create opportunities for participants to critically examine traditional approaches, question

underlying assumptions, and develop innovative adaptations that better serve increasingly diverse student populations. Bradley (2012) strengthened this transformative aim by highlighting how Western philosophical frameworks have historically served to justify epistemological colonialism in music education, demonstrating why critical examination of inherited structures is essential.

Emancipatory

The emancipatory quality of culturally responsive teaching draws on critical understandings of past inequities yet operates primarily in the projective agency dimension, with the aspiration of creating conditions that foster both individual and collective agency. This involves recognizing what Bradley (2012) identified as historical traces of colonialism while imagining more equitable futures. The emancipatory aspect of culturally responsive teaching becomes evident when TEs help participants recognize how traditional practices might privilege certain musical traditions while marginalizing others, encouraging them to create more inclusive approaches that honor multiple ways of knowing and making music.

Whereas culturally responsive teaching provides additional language for identifying possible motivations behind TE agency achievement, communities of practice (CoP) theory provides crucial insight into how agency develops through collective engagement. Wenger's (1999) foundational framework emphasizes that professional knowledge and identity emerge through participation in shared practice rather than through isolated individual development. This social learning perspective complements Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model by highlighting how communal structures shape

agency achievement.

Communities of Practice as a Lens for Teacher Educator Agency

Wenger's (1999) communities of practice theory centers on learning through social interaction within groups that share a joint enterprise and develop a shared repertoire. In CoPs, members mutually engage by contributing different expertise while working toward shared purposes, forming professional communities around “a common goal or shared concern (a joint enterprise)” that they continuously negotiate (Zaffini, 2018, p. 38). In the case of AOSA Teacher Education, this joint enterprise is the shared commitment to supporting the professional learning of Orff Schulwerk-inspired educators.

Relatedly, Lave and Wenger's (1991) legitimate peripheral participation describes how “newcomers” gradually move from peripheral to full participation as they learn from veteran members or “old-timers” (p. 12). Zaffini (2018) noted, “As [CoP members] participate in the community, practitioners maintain ties to tradition but also discover new practices, and the community changes” (p. 39). This conception particularly resonates with how TEs might move gradually into the status of established TE in the AOSA Teacher Education community, beginning at the periphery and developing expertise through interaction with experienced members before achieving full participation status.

CoPs function through shared repertoire (including routines, symbols, concepts, and actions), mutual engagement, multimembership, and brokering (Wenger, 1999). Communities evolve as newcomers access exemplars, learn practices, and develop

professional identities, maintaining traditions while discovering new approaches that change the community (Zaffini, 2018). Key benefits include decreasing isolation (Herrington et al., 2006), increasing empowerment (Hou, 2015), and fostering professional dialogue (Bitzer, 2010), as experienced educators mentor newcomers while remaining open to innovative ideas. These benefits can provide valuable support for AOSA TEs who often work in different courses across the country but share a commitment to Orff Schulwerk.

Despite these potential advantages, the research literature identifies several challenges inherent in CoPs that may emerge within the AOSA Teacher Education context. Hierarchical relationships between participants can impede collaborative knowledge construction, as demonstrated by Bullough et al. (2004) who found university professors maintained dominance over clinical faculty rather than fostering true partnership. Additionally, maintaining cohesion around a shared enterprise might present difficulties when members hold diverse interpretations of core practices, as evidenced by Mak and Pun's (2015) findings that interpersonal tensions constituted a notable challenge for CoP participants.

Sustainability challenges frequently emerge when CoP members return to their separate institutional contexts, as Mak and Pun (2015) observed with ESL teachers whose community struggled to persist beyond organized workshops. Other obstacles include unequal distribution of work among participants (Cook & Buck, 2014), time constraints limited engagement (Mak & Pun, 2015), and tensions that arise when spanning boundaries between different educational domains (Bullough et al., 2004). These findings

suggest that AOSA TEs might encounter similar challenges as they navigate potential power dynamics between experienced and newer members, work to maintain a coherent understanding of Orff Schulwerk principles across unique teaching contexts, and sustain meaningful collaboration despite geographic and institutional separation. As will be discussed in greater detail in chapter six, although one might conceive of the AOSA Teacher Education community as a “macro-CoP”, the focus group functioned as a “micro-CoP,” emerging around specific shared purposes, demonstrating the multimembership that Wenger (1999) described as influencing identity formation and allowing individuals to serve as brokers connecting different communities.

PLCs as Collaborative Structures for Teacher Educator Agency

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) represent a specific type of CoP focused on education that could potentially serve as transformational spaces for fostering teacher agency. These collaborative structures foster professional growth and pedagogical innovation while addressing isolation among music educators. Verdi (2022) positioned PLCs as a “prominent form of high-quality professional development” that facilitates supportive environments where educators can collaborate, share teaching strategies, and reflect on practices (p. 14). Battersby (2019) noted that successful PLCs provide forums where music educators become active participants in both their own learning and that of their students. This active participation highlights the transformative potential of these communities in reshaping music programs through supportive leadership, shared values, and collective learning. PLCs create spaces where teachers can consider possibilities and make judgments in response to emerging classroom demands while drawing on shared

professional knowledge and support.

The music education literature has documented multiple ways that PLCs enable music teachers to reimagine their practice and develop agency in their professional roles. Sindberg's (2016) collective case study examined how a PLC of music teachers sustained growth while incorporating Comprehensive Musicianship Through Performance (CMP) into their teaching practices, finding that collaborative culture was essential to teacher change and shifts in knowledge. For music educators experiencing professional isolation, PLCs offered critical connections to broader communities of practice, with Virtual Professional Learning Communities (VPLCs) providing particular transformative potential for rural teachers (Rolandson & Ross-Hekkel, 2022). Bernard et al. (2018) examined interactions among music teachers in online communities of practice, finding that social media played a valuable role in providing communal spaces for shared purposes.

PLCs also create environments for critical examination of important social issues, as evidenced by Knapp's (2024) study of a collaborative teacher group exploring narratives of race and disability. Stanley (2011) reinforced the transformative nature of learning communities, identifying six characteristics that contribute to their effectiveness, including: (a) the length and quality of participants' commitment to the group; (b) the tension between the goals of improving content-area knowledge and pedagogical skills; (c) the way that teachers with varied goals for development participate and assume different roles within the group; (d) the group's mechanisms for honest examination of teaching practices and its structures for conversation; (e) the teaching assignments

represented within the group membership; and (f) support for classroom implementation of new ideas and skills” (p. 74). Despite their potential, researchers have also identified challenges in establishing transformative PLCs, with West et al. (2021) noting how contextual and systemic factors can enable or constrain their transformative potential.

The communities of practice framework provided a valuable lens for understanding how music educators develop professionally through social learning processes. Wenger's (1999) theory illuminates how the AOSA Teacher Education community might function as a macro-CoP with established pathways to expertise, while smaller PLCs within this larger community could potentially serve as transformative spaces where music educators can develop agency through collaborative inquiry and mutual support. This nested relationship between larger institutional CoPs and more localized PLCs offers a viable possibility for exploration, as it acknowledges how legitimate participation is negotiated within communities with varying degrees of formalization. As Conway and Edgar (2014) suggested, teachers require different types of professional development across the career cycle, and PLC-style communities of practice may offer spaces that accommodate these evolving needs. For this study, the CoP framework offers an analytical lens that illuminates the inherently social and relational dimensions of TE agency within AOSA, revealing how power and agency are negotiated differently at each level of professional community engagement.

AOSA Context: Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education

Teachers may look to the Orff Schulwerk approach for guidance and structures to support their professional learning needs (Abril & Gault, 2016). In many ways, Orff

Schulwerk is a resilient and resonant approach to music learning (Hawley, 2024). Carl Orff's wildflower—the Schulwerk—continues to adapt and pop up in new places, resilient because its value continues to resonate across settings. However, understanding the complexities of teacher educator agency within this approach requires acknowledging both its pedagogical affordances and its critiques.

Although many Orff Schulwerk-inspired practitioners have been coached to view the Schulwerk as an approach, not a method or ideology (Abril, 2013), critical scholars highlight the ways in which practitioners may not recognize its methodological aspects. Benedict (2009) suggested that manifestations of both Orff and Kodály pedagogies have drifted from the play- and creativity-centered approach imagined by their founders, noting that “these methods have become more real than the music itself” (p. 213). She added:

As we move farther away from the process of inquiry originally embedded in the conception and construction of these musical engagements, the educative process becomes more and more myopic. This, in turn, determines, delineates and narrows possibilities of and for meaningful learning. (p. 213)

Cicco (2020) identified connections between Critical Pedagogy in Music Education (CPME) (Abrahams, 2005; Freire, 2000) and Orff Schulwerk, noting both approaches leverage collaboration and student-teacher relationships where “the teacher is not the sole possessor of knowledge, and the students are fully aware of their autonomy” (p. 9). However, Cicco highlighted a notable distinction between OS and CPME; in Orff Schulwerk, teachers tend to consider first what they teach rather than who they teach,

whereas in CPME, teachers prioritize providing contextually relevant music-making experiences. This critique is further extended by Spitz (2019), who pointed to the consequences of unchecked formulaicity and standardization, suggesting that today's Orff Schulwerk “might be considered more of a walled garden” rather than the “wildflower” Orff originally envisioned (p. 29). Spitz argued that this transformation reflects how the approach has become institutionalized behind organizational structures, certification requirements, and paywalled resources, shifting away from its improvisational roots toward more controlled, teacher-directed implementation.

These critiques provide an important backdrop for examining how TEs navigate agency within the structures of the AOSA. Scholars have studied different aspects of AOSA Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education since its inception in the 1960s (Brandon, 2013), including program history (Brandon, 2013); outcomes following teacher education (Sogin & Wang, 2008; Wang & Sogin, 2004; Williamson, 2011); influence on curriculum (Klossner, 2018); notable TEs (Kupinski, 2023); TE beliefs (Scott, 2010), TE expertise (Hersey, 2019), TE ideals and philosophies (Taranto, 2010), and TE practices (O'Hehir, 2005). Additionally, recent studies have drawn connections between Orff Schulwerk and culturally responsive education (Kikoler, 2022) and music teacher professional development (Johnson et al., 2019; Stanley, 2012).

To focus this section of the literature review, I have selected five key studies that relate explicitly or implicitly to teacher educator agency in the context of AOSA Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education. In this section, I surface connections and themes that informed interview questions, journal prompts, and focus groups topics as I sought to

uncover a deeper understanding of TEs' achievement of agency in this study.

AOSA Teacher Education History

The historical development of AOSA Teacher Education reveals a complex cross-cultural pedagogical transfer that established Western European foundations within American educational contexts (Brandon, 2013). The roots of Orff Schulwerk trace to the first teacher training with Gunild Keetman at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria in 1953. In the late 1950s, American teachers traveled to Austria to learn from Orff and Keetman, beginning the systematic transfer of Orff Schulwerk to the United States. As interest grew in the US in the 1960s, AOSA was founded in 1968. The organization's development progressed from unofficial workshops to a formal 3-level course series with sequential curriculum, with the first AOSA Course Guidelines for Levels I II III established in 1980.

Curriculum development in AOSA Teacher Education has been shaped by conversations around standardization and artistic freedom, reflecting philosophical conflicts within the Orff Schulwerk approach (Brandon, 2013). Curriculum guidelines were established to “maintain the integrity” of the teacher education programs, yet it was noted “this sequential training must allow for artistic license and freedom that was the cornerstone of Orff Schulwerk” (Brandon, 2013, p. 187). These competing priorities included: methodology/fixed approach vs. “freely-improvised approach” (p. 188); inclusion of pedagogical techniques for implementing Orff Schulwerk vs. “critical examination of music education philosophy and underlying purposes for the music curriculum” (p. 187); and a pedagogical model vs. methodology.

Carl Orff himself recognized the tension between maintaining pedagogical integrity and allowing for adaptation, warning against “development in the wrong direction” while emphasizing the need for “basic specialist training and absolute familiarity with the style, the possibilities and the aims of the Schulwerk” (Orff, 1977, p. 6). This foundational concern about maintaining quality while enabling growth became central to AOSA’s curriculum development efforts. By the 1970s, the rapid proliferation of training programs across the nation required organizational response. The AOSA committee’s solution reflected Orff’s original tension, establishing “common goals” while allowing creative license when designing how to organize the material” (p. vi). This compromise established a precedent that continues to influence how content standards and pedagogical ideas flow through generations of TEs, creating ongoing negotiations between consistency and creativity in course development.

The implementation of Orff Schulwerk within specific school district contexts reveals how teacher education programs influence curriculum culture over time (Klossner, 2018). Klossner’s analysis of the first decade of the Memphis State University (MSU) Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education Course (1971–80) traced how the Orff Schulwerk approach was adapted within Memphis Schools' music curriculum, demonstrating how people, place, and time influenced its introduction and implementation. The study’s timeframe proved particularly meaningful, as 1980 marked AOSA's full adoption of course guidelines, allowing examination of both pre- and post-standardization practices.

Understanding curriculum evolution requires examining how curricula transform across cultures and time periods, how sociopolitical influences impact adaptations, what forces drive change, and how time influences curricular transformation (Klossner, 2018). Through analysis of oral histories, academic journals, theses, dissertations, and course materials, four primary themes emerged: collaboration, autonomy, equality, and commitment. Individuals influenced the curriculum through translation, adaptation, collaboration, and identification processes. Place impacted the curriculum at school, city, and university levels as participants constructed new understandings through shared musical experiences. Time's impact manifested through idea flow, cycling between “abundant time” periods of free circulation of new ideas and progress, and “sustained time” when ideas were refined rather than expanded (Klossner, 2018, p. 43). Ultimately, “the force that drove the process of curricular evolution was people” (p. xiv).

The curriculum adaptation process revealed how collaborative culture emerges from practitioners' need for mutual support. Teachers' sense of empowerment and creative freedom demonstrated autonomy, while discussions of equitable training access, resource equity, and culturally relevant music highlighted the equality theme. The intense commitment these teachers displayed extended to their students, colleagues, and the Orff Schulwerk approach itself. This documentation of translation and adaptation serves as “a guide for someone wishing to translate and adapt Orff Schulwerk to a new context in the future” (Klossner, 2018, p. xv). Understanding this historical development provides foundation for examining how these institutional structures have shaped the philosophical foundations and practices of TEs working within this framework.

Orff Schulwerk Teacher Educator Philosophical Foundations and Practices

Building on this historical foundation, the transmission of Orff Schulwerk principles across generations of TEs represents a critical mechanism for maintaining philosophical coherence within this established approach. The continuity of Orff Schulwerk ideals and philosophies through AOSA Teacher Education courses revealed the enduring influence of pedagogical lineages (Taranto, 2010). Tracing these lineages revealed the notable influences TEs had on their students, demonstrating how ideals and philosophies established by Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman were passed down from Orff Schulwerk teachers to their students. Taranto's 2010 survey of AOSA TEs examined when and where they completed their Levels courses, the materials used in those courses, major influences of their TEs, overall course experiences, and ideals and philosophies passed down from their teachers.

Taranto's analysis revealed the emergence of "pedagogical camps" due to the prominence of certain TEs and presented a family tree of Orff Schulwerk teachers and students. The study identified the ten most important influences named by TEs, with the first five relating to teaching children, and the second five relating to education of adults in Levels courses: (a) Orff Schulwerk is a "child-centered" approach; (b) Orff Schulwerk activities are "open-ended"; (c) Orff Schulwerk is a multi-faceted approach that involves the incorporation and integration of speech, singing, movement, playing instruments and drama; (d) Improvisation is at the core of Orff Schulwerk; (e) Orff Schulwerk involves process teaching; (f) The various *Musik fur Kinder* volumes are important primary source material; (g) Orff Schulwerk develops, stretches, and improves musicianship; (h) Orff

Schulwerk improves teaching abilities; (i) Orff Schulwerk improves skills in composition, arranging, and orchestration; and (j) “Music-making” in Orff Schulwerk leads to “community-building” (pp. 151–52). Additionally, most participants used *Music for Children* (Orff & Keetman, 1977) as primary curricular materials in their coursework.

Taranto’s research raised important questions about pedagogical variation within Orff Schulwerk that remain relevant for investigation. A key concern involves understanding “why there are different approaches to Orff Schulwerk pedagogy, even though the elements of that pedagogy (i.e., process teaching, or the integration of speech, singing, movement, playing instruments, drama, etc.) remain the same” (Taranto, 2010, p. 153). Taranto suggested a two-stream explanation, originally suggested by Jane Frazee—one that is “rhythmic, contrapuntal” (Orff Institute, Brigitte Warner and Isabel Carley) and a “melodic/harmonic system” promoted by Jos Wuytack, primarily for the accompaniment of children's folk songs and vocal music. Further exploration of these two streams of influence and how they play out in the actions of current Orff Schulwerk TEs could prove valuable. In the 2025 educational climate, questions might be less about two elements of music-based streams and instead focus on a model with a traditional stream and an innovative stream.

Additionally, observational studies comparing “the practices and procedures used by the various ‘camps’ ... and branches” of the family tree could provide valuable insights (Taranto, 2010, pp. 153–54). Such studies “may determine similarities and differences, as well as strengths and weaknesses in Orff Schulwerk pedagogy, and also help further the discussion among Orff Schulwerk practitioners” about pedagogical

consistency (Taranto, 2010, p. 154).

This research relates directly to my study as I examined how TEs compare their practice to that of their mentors through the lens of teacher agency. During interviews, I asked course participants about their own Levels course experiences—who their teachers were, what inspired them, and what they perceived as influences, either ideas to replicate or do differently. This approach gave me a window to investigate how participants' own Levels experiences shaped their sense of iterational agency—what they brought with them into their TE role, beliefs, histories and prior experiences. Additionally, in this study I explored in what ways their perception of their mentors' agency—how they observed them modeling agentic discernment and action—influenced how they enacted the role. These questions were included in the interviews.

Building on Taranto's examination of pedagogical ideals, understanding how these ideals manifest in teaching practice requires examining teacher expertise in action. Hersey (2019) investigated teacher expertise by observing TEs in their elementary general music classroom settings, not the Levels course setting. This shift from examining what TEs believe to how they enact those beliefs in practice provides crucial insight into the relationship between pedagogical ideals and classroom implementation. Hersey's analysis revealed key themes that illuminate how expert Orff teachers enact pedagogical ideals in practice, particularly creativity, critical thinking, and self-expression (Hersey, 2019). Most relevant to this study, Hersey highlighted the significance of AOSA's experiential teacher education model, where teachers engage in the same activities their students would experience. This hands-on approach develops

teachers' creativity and pedagogical knowledge while providing insights into children's learning processes. This experiential approach connects to questions of teacher agency, as it positions TEs as both learners and facilitators, potentially influencing how they perceive and exercise their own pedagogical choices.

Understanding teacher agency also requires examining the question of how personal beliefs and limitations intersect with institutional expectations, as explored in Scott's (2010) earlier research on AOSA TEs' beliefs about singing. Scott revealed that TEs were drawn to the approach for its "choice, freedom, and creativity" as they adapted implementation based on student abilities. Specifically, participants demonstrated agency by overcoming perceived vocal inadequacies to embrace the philosophy that "everyone should participate in singing," showing how personal convictions can shape teaching approaches and agency achievement (Scott, 2010).

Although examining individual TE practices reveals how pedagogical lineages, experiential learning, and personal beliefs shape agency, understanding how TEs navigate the tradition and innovation requires examining both organizational structures that both enable and constrain these choices. The historical development of AOSA Teacher Education, from its European origins through the establishment of curriculum guidelines and pedagogical camps, created institutional frameworks that continue to influence how TEs exercise agency today. The following section explores how agency might function within AOSA and similar music education organizations.

Organizational Change in Music Education Institutions

The intersection of ecological agency, culturally responsive teaching, and communities of practice becomes particularly complex when considering organizational change within AOSA. As an institution, AOSA navigates change through both planned initiatives and emergent processes, creating a dynamic context that shapes TE agency.

Understanding the distinction between first-order and second-order change (Kezar, 2018) helps illuminate AOSA's institutional evolution. Although first-order changes involve surface-level adjustments to curriculum or policies, second-order changes require deeper transformation of organizational culture and power relationships. This framework helps explain why efforts to diversify practices may not address underlying assumptions that perpetuate exclusionary traditions (Hess, 2015). Similarly, Schön and Argyris's (1996) concept of organizational learning reveals how institutions may engage in single-loop learning through surface-level diversity initiatives while failing to achieve the double-loop learning needed to address structural inequities (Salvador & Kelly-McHale, 2017).

Power dynamics shape how TEs achieve agency within AOSA. Battilana (2006) identified three crucial forms of power: structural (formal authority over certification), cultural (control over defining "authentic" practices), and political (influence over resources and leadership). TEs acting as institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio, 1988) must navigate these power dimensions while building coalitions for change and reframing traditional practices through contemporary lenses.

As a professional association, AOSA may face particular challenges as an

organization due to its dual role as a steward and PD provider (Greenwood et al., 2002). Successfully navigating this complexity requires creating spaces where TEs can critically examine organizational assumptions while grappling with emergent change initiatives that move beyond surface-level adjustments to address deeper structural inequities.

Summary

Through this literature review, I established the theoretical foundations and research context for examining how the TEs in this study perceived and used their agency to navigate their roles in AOSA Teacher Education. In this review I synthesized scholarship across critical dimensions: theoretical frameworks (ecological teacher agency, culturally responsive teaching, communities of practice), AOSA's institutional context, and the curriculum policy structures that influence professional learning in music education. These intersecting bodies of literature reveal how TEs experience agency while operating within a complex institutional structure like AOSA. By examining these pockets of literature alongside one another, this review provided the foundational knowledge required to make sense of and discuss findings and identify implications of this study.

Building on these insights, in this study I addressed several critical gaps in current understanding. Although researchers have examined teacher agency broadly, few studies focus specifically on how TEs experience agency within professional development organizations like AOSA. Though scholars have examined how institutional structures impact K–12 music teacher agency (Powell, 2019; Tucker, 2022), less attention has been paid to how these structures shape teacher educator agency. Additionally, while scholars

have demonstrated the value of professional learning communities in supporting teacher transformation (Johnson et al., 2019; West, 2021), the field lacks specific understanding of how these communities function within music education organizations like AOSA at both macro and micro levels.

In conclusion, this investigation of TE agency within AOSA Teacher Education addresses a gap in music education research. The findings contribute to the field by illuminating the relationship between organizational culture and structures and teacher educator agency, offering practical insights for music education organizations seeking change. While acknowledging the contextual specificity of this study, this research may provide valuable knowledge applicable across music education and teacher professional development settings.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS & RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, I present the methods, research design, data collection procedures, and analytical framework for this study. The purpose of this study was to examine in what ways, if any, the structures and policies of AOSA Teacher Education afforded or constrained teacher educator (TE) agency.

The research questions were:

1. In what ways, if any, did the Orff Schulwerk TEs perceive and use their agency to serve as arbiters of tradition or instigators of change in AOSA Teacher Education?
2. In what ways, if any, did these TEs' achievement of agency align or conflict with the aims of the AOSA

Qualitative Research Approach

In this study I employed a qualitative research approach to investigate ecological teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015) in the organizational context of a teacher education program (AOSA). Given the study's focus on investigating how TEs perceived their agency, qualitative methods seemed the prudent choice. Qualitative methods are well-suited for deepening understanding of how individuals interpret their experiences, explore complex interactions between people and their environments, and investigate phenomena with multiple variables that are difficult to isolate (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach allowed for in-depth examination of both the personal experiences of TEs and the social-organizational contexts in which they operated. The interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry aligned well with my interest in understanding meaning-making

processes as TEs navigated their roles within the AOSA.

Case Study

Within the qualitative paradigm, I used case study design (Stake, 2005) as an overarching methodological framework. This design facilitated a detailed investigation of a “bounded system,” where individual action and institutional context mutually influence each other (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The bounded nature of AOSA Teacher Education made it particularly suitable for case study examination. Through my research questions, I sought to understand how AOSA's systemic elements—its policies, traditions, and organizational goals—interacted with TE agency. I examined how four TEs navigated their roles, revealing patterns in how AOSA culture and structures afforded and constrained agency.

Although AOSA Teacher Education shares some features with other specialized methods-based educational programs (e.g., Kodály, Modern Band, Dalcroze), its unique policies, practices, and traditions create a context that shapes TE agency. My research design supported deep examination of how these organizational elements interacted with TEs’ capacities to act as both tradition-keepers and change agents, a key focus of my first research question. Additionally, the methodology's emphasis on understanding “activity within important circumstances” (Stake, 1995, p. xi) aligned with my second research question's focus on how TE agency operated within AOSA's organizational mission and structures.

This design aligned with Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological conceptualization of agency as emergent from individual-environmental interactions rather than as an

individual attribute. Multiple participants supported analysis of both individual experiences and cross-participant comparisons, revealing how agency manifested across contexts within AOSA. At the start of the study, my intention was to surface implications specific to AOSA rather than generalize or work towards transferability relating to other multi-day courses and workshops for music teachers (Barrett, 2006). In the following section, I describe how I selected participants within the bounded system of AOSA Teacher Education.

Study Participants and Recruitment Strategy

For this study, I utilized purposeful sampling to recruit participants whose experiences, geographies, and cultures represent the diversity of AOSA. From a pool of 139 approved AOSA TEs at the time of the study, I established specific selection criteria: (a) current certification as a Level I Basic TE; (b) no direct prior teaching relationship with the researcher, to encourage candid participation in focus group sessions; and (c) geographic distribution across different regions to provide diverse perspectives. I determined that a group of four study participants would provide an intimate focus group dynamic, while still providing a sufficient range of experiences to understand how agency manifests across different contexts.

Recruitment Process

The recruitment process began with a systematic review of Level I Basic instructors, first removing those with whom I had previously taught. Recognizing the need for deeper context about potential participants' backgrounds, I consulted with the

AOSA Professional Development Director, Karen Benson, who provided valuable insights about teaching contexts, years of experience, and course involvement. Following this consultation, I reviewed candidate profiles again, contacted five potential participants, and four agreed to participate.

Final Participant Demographics

The four study participants—Crystal, Eva, Mary, and Max—brought varied perspectives from across the organization. Geographically, they spanned the United States (one West Coast, two East Coast, one South). Their experience levels varied, with one an established TE with over ten years of experience, and three who became TEs within the last five years. Two TEs also served as course directors, three TEs taught at multiple sites, and one taught exclusively at a single location at the time of the study.

The group included three female-identifying and one male-identifying participants, with representative racial and ethnic backgrounds (two white, one African American, one Filipino American). Each participant selected their own pseudonym and reviewed their participant profile to ensure appropriate levels of detail and confidentiality, particularly important given the close-knit nature of the AOSA TE community. Detailed profiles are provided in Chapter 4 to provide additional context about their life stories.

The Study Design

Case study methodology requires multiple, complementary data collection methods to develop comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Miksza et al. (2023) suggested, “a multiplicity of data sources is [a]

hallmark of data generation in case studies” (p. 175). This multi-modality approach supported triangulation of data sources and provided varied perspectives on how TEs experienced agency within AOSA Teacher Education.

Data Collection

Following Stake’s (1995) emphasis on defining clear boundaries to establish the scope of inquiry, this case study was bounded by time (the 2024–2025 academic year), place (AOSA Teacher Education), and context (the institutional culture and pedagogical traditions of AOSA). Over a five-month period—October 2024 to February 2025—I engaged in dialogue with four AOSA TEs through multiple channels: individual interviews, a focus group discussion, and shared journaling. Data collection involved: (a) multiple semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), (b) a focus group that built upon emerging interview themes to examine how TEs collectively considered leveraging tradition and creating change, (c) participant journaling (voice and written), (d) document analysis of AOSA curriculum policy documents, and (e) researcher journaling throughout the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom, and the focus group was held at a hotel in Minneapolis, Minnesota in January 2025.

The focus group format proved particularly valuable in generating rich data and functioned, in some ways, activated the very teacher agency dynamics being studied. By bringing participants together in structured collaborative inquiry, this method created a unique opportunity to observe how TEs collectively negotiated tensions between tradition and innovation—a process central to both research questions. The following sub-sections outline each data collection strategy, with special attention to the conceptualization and

implementation of the focus group approach.

Document Analysis

To examine how TE achievement of agency aligned with AOSA's aims, I conducted a critical content analysis (Kohlbacher, 2006) of AOSA curriculum guidelines and policy statements. Critical content analysis was an appropriate choice for this study as words and texts served as viable sources of data, especially when because they upheld certain values or ideologies (Hodder, 1994). The analysis focused on AOSA Curriculum versions 4.0 (2012) and 5.0 (2024), examining sections most relevant to TE agency: Acknowledgements, Foreword and Introduction, Rationale and Improvisation, and the Standards Matrix.

For the systematic comparison of these documents, I employed an AI-assisted analytical approach using Claude 3.7 Sonnet. Although Claude 3.7 Sonnet offers robust language processing capabilities, I maintained awareness of potential limitations such as potential biases including analytical biases and the need for human interpretation of context-specific meanings, which I addressed through systematic verification. The AI tool supported the identification of textual changes between curriculum versions, while I maintained responsibility for determining the significance of these changes relative to TE agency. To ensure reliability, I verified the identified changes against the original documents manually and refined the categorization framework based on this verification process. Through this collaborative human-AI approach, I identified nineteen distinct categories of changes, which are listed in Appendix X. Although the AI tool efficiently processed textual differences, all interpretive analysis regarding how these changes

reflected tradition or innovation within AOSA's approach to teacher education remained under my scholarly oversight. This analysis provided a clear picture of current AOSA policy regarding teacher education programs and practices, serving as a benchmark for subsequent interview conversations and focus group discussions designed to illuminate teacher agency.

Semi-structured Interviews

I conducted multiple semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) with each TE to provide time and space for their individual stories and perspectives. Individual interviews, rather than initial group conversations, were chosen to ensure conversational depth and to protect confidentiality (Glesne, 2016). I took inspiration from Seidman's (2019) three-part approach to phenomenological interviewing but adapted the final interview to a focus group. Following Seidman's framework, the first interview established the context of the participants' experience, and the second provided space for participants "to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs" (p. 21). Rather than individual culminating interviews, participants gathered in a focus group to collectively reflect on the "meaning their experiences hold for them" (p. 21). This arc provided space for what Barrett (2014) referred to as a "dramatic unfolding" (p. 117).

The interview process included two rounds of individual interviews conducted via Zoom: initial interviews in October 2024 and follow-up interviews in November 2024. Each interview round was designed to illuminate different aspects of TE agency. First interviews focused on participants' backgrounds and broader perspectives on agency,

allowing for identification of iterative (past-oriented) agency. Second interviews explored day-to-day challenges of teaching in AOSA Level I Basic courses, providing opportunities to surface practical-evaluative (present-oriented) and projective (future-oriented) agency. This sequential approach revealed how past experiences shaped current agency and how TEs envisioned future possibilities within AOSA's organizational structure. Drawing from key insights gathered during the individual interviews, I structured the focus group discussions to explore emerging themes in greater depth and validate preliminary findings through collaborative dialogue.

Focus Group Methodology

In designing this study's focus group component, I drew from Kitzinger's (1995) foundational work on focus groups as interactive spaces for data generation. After reviewing phase one data (interviews, document analysis) and revisiting the literature, I realized this focus group could serve a dual purpose. Although focus groups traditionally function primarily as data collection settings, my analysis of interview transcripts, researcher notes, and journal responses led me to envision something more transformative. By selecting and adapting protocols that invited deeper reflection, I created opportunities for TEs to contribute valuable data and experience moments of professional insight as they articulated their practices within a community of peers. This approach aligned with my broader aim to situate this study at the intersection of professional development and policy research in music education.

Throughout the focus group process, I navigated the emergent dual nature of the experience as both a data collection method and a professional learning space. Although I

began with research-focused objectives, the professional development dimension emerged through participants' interactions rather than through directive facilitation on my part. I positioned myself as a prompter, listener, and occasional paraphraser, drawing on my experience with instructional coaching strategies to facilitate dialogue without imposing my perspectives. This approach allowed participants to generate collective insights with minimal intervention, thereby preserving data authenticity. This experience provided valuable insights into TE agency and into how collaborative reflection environments might activate individual and collective agency, an unexpected but notable methodological finding that enriched the study's contributions.

Theoretical Context and Implementation. My focus group design choices were guided by Priestley's (2015) three dimensions of teacher agency and Tucker's (2020) framework for teacher agency development. Tucker's use of teacher agency as a teaching framework prompted me to consider in what ways the act of participating in a focus group may serve as an agency activator for study participants. A de facto pop-up professional learning community, the TEs may have "[experienced] the cognitive dissonance of encountering alternative approaches that often lead to new learning and agency through the constructive development of teacher beliefs, professional discourses, and professional knowledge" (Tucker, 2020, p. 33).

Implementation. With support from an American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA) Research Grant, I brought Eva, Max, Mary, and Crystal together for an in-person focus group in Minneapolis, Minnesota on January 11, 2025. Rather than using a conference room, I hosted our sessions in a hotel room suite for a more relaxed,

collaborative atmosphere conducive to open dialogue. The setting supported the vulnerability and deep reflection needed for exploring teacher educator agency, while maintaining professional focus through structured protocols and clear objectives.

Session Structure. For the focus group, I designed three activities inspired by Priestley's (2015) agency dimensions to both investigate and potentially cultivate TE agency. First, drawing from Brandon's (2013) work on historical tensions between fixed methodological approaches and artistic freedom in AOSA Teacher Education, I opened with a "Position Yourself" activity inspired by the iterative dimension of agency. After the TEs positioned themselves on an invisible continuum across the hotel room suite, I facilitated structured reflection and storytelling that illuminated their decision-making processes. The second session, focused on problems of practice, drew upon TEs' sense of practical-evaluative agency. This created space for participants to critically reflect on day-to-day teaching challenges, closely aligned to Tucker's (2020) process of problematization, characterization, and deliberation. The protocols provided structured ways for participants to share challenges, receive feedback, and explore solutions in a supportive, non-evaluative environment. The TEs concluded with a session focused on collectively imagining possible futures for AOSA Teacher Education. This visioning work was deliberately anchored in both the historical and philosophical foundations of Orff Schulwerk while encouraging participants to grapple with emerging challenges and opportunities.

Connection to Research Questions. This focus group design directly addressed both research questions by creating space to explore individual experiences with agency

through personal storytelling and reflection. The structure allowed for examination of how agency achievement aligns with AOSA aims through collective examination of practice and vision. Additionally, the interactive nature of the focus group enabled participants to build upon each other's insights, creating richer data than individual interviews alone might provide.

The extended format and carefully structured protocols created multiple entry points and lenses for considering the research questions. Each session was designed to probe different aspects of teacher agency while maintaining connections to AOSA's organizational context. The progression from individual positioning to collective visioning allowed for increasingly complex exploration of how TEs experience and enact agency.

Participant Reflections & Audio Diary Methodology

Audio diaries enable researchers to “explore how people's experiences, thoughts and conditions interplay and change over time, ... making sense of their identities and lived experiences” (Verma, 2021, p. 1346). I offered participants multiple reflection formats—audio diaries, text messages, or email—with audio diaries (voice memo) presented as one option that could capture more immediate, less edited reflections than written formats. Although not all participants chose this modality, this format offered advantages similar to leaving a voicemail rather than composing an email, potentially encouraging participation.

Implementation. Participants were invited to provide text or audio reflections during December 2024, bridging the gap between individual interviews and the focus

group, and again in February 2025, one month after the focus group gathering. The timing of the first reflection series was designed to maintain engagement throughout the study while providing space for processing initial interview discussions and preparing for focus group conversations. The culminating reflections provided space for the TEs to offer thoughtful retrospective on their experience and what impressions continued to linger. This approach aligned with the study's longitudinal design, allowing for examination of how TEs' perspectives and experiences evolved.

Prompts and Structures. I sent weekly reflection prompts via text message throughout December 2024. Participants chose to respond via voice memo, voicemail, text message, or email with guidance to spend no more than five minutes per prompt. I had hoped this flexible response format would make responding convenient while still generating meaningful reflection and maintaining engagement.

The prompts were sequenced to build toward our focus group discussion:

Week 1 focused on professional passion and sustainability:

- “What moments make you feel most alive as a TE?”
- “What sustains your passion for this work?”

Week 2 explored professional evolution and decision-making:

- “How has your understanding of what makes an effective TE changed since you began?”
- “How has your confidence in making independent decisions as a TE evolved since you began? What contributed to this evolution?”

Additional ongoing reflection prompts included:

- “As you reflect on our last conversation, what is still circling for you?”
- “As you think ahead to our next conversation, what might be a topic you would like to discuss?”

These open-ended prompts were designed to encourage retrospective reflection and forward-thinking consideration. The structure allowed participants to process previous discussions while also shaping future conversations, creating a thread of reflection throughout the study.

Connection to Research Questions. The flexible reflection format proved valuable for addressing research questions about TE agency, with audio responses notably encouraging spontaneous, unrehearsed reflections on professional identity. These reflections provided unique insights into how TEs processed and navigated their roles in real-time. The longitudinal reflection process captured the evolution of participants' thinking between structured interactions, with responses recorded in participants' own environments providing context about how agency manifested in day-to-day professional practice.

Data Analysis

My analytical approach evolved organically as the study progressed, following what Creswell and Poth (2016) describe as a data analysis spiral. Although I began with Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological approach to teacher agency as my primary analytical framework, the emergent nature of case study research led me to incorporate additional theoretical lenses. As patterns emerged from the data, I found that elements of communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018)

offered valuable supplementary analytical perspectives. This flexible approach aligned well with case study methodology. Rather than constraining my analysis to predetermined categories, I allowed the data to guide me toward the most illuminating analytical tools for understanding TE agency.

Phase 1: Document Analysis and Individual Interviews

I began with a critical content analysis comparing two versions of AOSA curriculum documents: version 4.0 (2012) and version 5.0 (2024). For systematic comparison, I developed a detailed analytical process: First, I divided the documents into key sections for detailed examination. Then, I created a comprehensive spreadsheet to track changes, ultimately identifying nineteen distinct categories of modifications. Using AI-assisted analysis helped me maintain consistency in my comparisons while focusing on interpreting how changes reflected either continuity or notable shifts within the organization. However, as I experimented with using AI as a tool in my analytical process, I discovered the importance of being discerning about when AI assistance was helpful and when it became counterproductive. To avoid confusion about the authenticity of my insights, I developed a practice of completing my own analysis first before consulting AI. I found that establishing my own initial interpretations, then using AI for consistency checks, proved most effective. Following document analysis, I turned my attention to the individual interview data.

My analysis process began with an uninterrupted read-through of all transcripts to gain a holistic view. During subsequent readings, I developed emergent codes while remaining attentive to recurring patterns in participants' experiences and perspectives.

This immersive approach allowed me to identify preliminary patterns while remaining open to unexpected insights that emerged from participants' narratives.

Analysis progressed systematically through several stages. Beginning with unmarked transcripts, I first assigned basic codes to specific passages representing recurring patterns in participants' experiences. These initial codes—including “childhood influence,” “adaptive teacher move,” “hierarchy”—functioned as descriptive labels for categorizing meaningful segments of data. After labeling the transcripts, I reorganized the data by codes to identify patterns across participants' responses, which allowed me to extract particularly meaningful passages that exemplified emerging concepts. This reorganization facilitated deeper analysis by connecting thematically related content from across the dataset. Through this process of comparison and analytical memo-writing, the initial fifteen descriptive codes consolidated into five overarching themes: (1) Adapting to Adult Learner Needs, (2) Cultivating Community, (3) Disposition Development, (4) Transformational Teacher Education, and (5) Process Ponderings. Although these themes captured important aspects of the TEs' experiences, I realized they did not fully align with the theoretical framework of teacher agency that guided my research questions.

To address this gap, I developed a secondary analytical approach using a color-coded system based on Priestley's three dimensions of agency. This visual approach helped me track patterns across the data. Orange highlighting indicated the iterative dimension (past), including life histories, professional histories, and teaching experiences. Yellow marked the practical-evaluative dimension (present), encompassing cultural, structural, and material factors. Green signified the projective dimension

(future), covering both short-term adaptations and long-term visions. This process deepened my understanding of TE agency and informed the design of subsequent focus group protocols, allowing me to explore emerging patterns with participants in the next phase of data collection.

Phase 2: Focus Group Analysis and Audio Diaries

Immediately following the final focus group session, I approached data analysis with urgency to capture fresh insights. While watching the session videos, I carefully reviewed and corrected the auto-transcriptions. To preserve my immediate impressions, I recorded an hour of unfiltered insights and self-reflection dialogue before consulting my notes, which later proved pivotal in identifying connections to culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) that I might have missed had I employed a more rigid initial analysis approach.

Building on the analytical framework from Phase 1, I applied the same dimensional coding process to maintain consistency across data sources while allowing new insights to emerge. To ensure trustworthiness and guard against confirmation bias, I sought out and analyzed contradictory evidence throughout the analysis process.

Contradictory instances were specifically coded rather than dismissed as outliers, receiving additional analytical attention. For example, when one participant characterized AOSA guidelines as constraining while others found them supportive, I documented these contradictions and explored potential explanations through analytical memos. Maintaining notes on contradictory evidence ensured divergent perspectives remained visible throughout analysis, strengthening credibility while preserving the nuanced reality

of participants' varied experiences with TE agency.

Evolution of Theoretical Frameworks

I began this study using Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological teacher agency framework as my primary analytical lens, but my approach evolved organically as patterns emerged in the data. The emergent nature of qualitative research revealed the need for additional theoretical perspectives as my analysis deepened. This theoretical expansion allowed me to better capture the complexity of TE agency.

Integration of Culturally Responsive Teaching. The day after the focus group, I found myself contemplating how to proceed with data review. As I analyzed the focus group data through Priestley's ecological agency lens, I noticed that many emerging themes aligned with principles of cultural responsiveness. This realization led me to Gay's (2018) culturally responsive teaching (CRT) framework, which provided an additional analytical perspective for examining how TEs created inclusive learning spaces. Gay's six features of culturally responsive teaching—validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, emancipatory—proved particularly valuable for analyzing the possible motivations behind TE agency achievement. This framework complemented Priestley's ecological model beautifully, allowing me to examine both the temporal-ecological dimensions of agency and its application in creating inclusive, transformative learning experiences.

Integration of Communities of Practice. While drafting my discussion chapter, I noticed a theoretical gap around professional learning communities, particularly as the value of the collective learning experience emerged as a key finding. This observation led

me back to Wenger's (1999) communities of practice framework, which helped illuminate how TEs developed agency through collective learning and shared practice. The framework's key principles—mutual engagement, *joint* enterprise, shared repertoire, identity formation, legitimate peripheral participation, and boundary crossing—became especially useful as I came to consider the community of all AOSA TEs as a macro-community of practice and the focus group as a micro-community of practice. This framework complemented both Priestley's ecological model and Gay's culturally responsive teaching by connecting to both the social and collective dimensions of agency development. It helped explain how our “pop-up PLC,” as participants playfully termed it, created conditions for agency activation through collaborative meaning-making and shared professional growth.

Using these complementary frameworks in tandem enriched my analysis in several ways. I could examine how cultural conditions shaped agency while simultaneously analyzing how TEs used their agency to respond to cultural differences. Additionally, I could examine how structural supports and barriers affected agency while also understanding how communities of practice helped or hindered TEs in navigating those structures. Perhaps most importantly, this theoretical integration helped me move beyond simple dichotomies of tradition versus innovation to better understand the complex ways TEs used their agency to leverage traditions while reimagining practices to meet student needs.

Establishing Trustworthiness

My position as an AOSA TE required careful attention to trustworthiness throughout the research process. The AOSA's support through a \$5,000 research grant necessitated transparent acknowledgment of my relationship with the organization, and I approached this work hoping that new understandings would be received by AOSA as valuable insights for organizational learning. To manage potential conflicts of interest and ensure credibility, I employed multiple complementary verification strategies.

Reflexive Practices and Researcher Positioning

Throughout the research process, I maintained a research journal documenting methodological decisions and emerging insights to support analytical integrity. This reflexive journaling practice proved particularly valuable given my position as a TE, as it created a dedicated space to distinguish between my experiences and those of the participants, helping me recognize when my interpretations might be influenced by my own professional history. The journal entries captured moments of surprise and dissonance in my thinking, signaling areas where my assumptions were being challenged by the data, an important indicator of authentic engagement with participants' perspectives rather than confirmation of my preconceptions.

My positionality as both researcher and member of the AOSA community likely influenced both data collection and analysis. Although my insider status facilitated trust and candid discussion with participants, it may have limited my ability to recognize taken-for-granted assumptions within the organization or to critically examine aspects of practice that align with my own pedagogical values. Despite reflexive practices

throughout the study, these blind spots may have affected how I interpreted and synthesized participants' experiences.

Member Validation and External Review

As I designed the study, I established multiple checkpoints for participant validation. These included member checks of interview transcripts and review of profiles compiled after interviews but before the focus group. This multi-layered approach to validation gave participants opportunities to confirm the accuracy of their representations and contribute to the developing analysis. I received feedback from my committee members at several points throughout the study, including regular conversations with my supervisor, which helped me interrogate my assumptions and refine my interpretations.

Data Collection and Analysis Integrity

I employed multiple strategies to ensure the integrity and trustworthiness throughout data collection and analysis. First, I achieved triangulation through multiple data collection methods, allowing me to examine teacher educator agency from various angles. Detailed field notes captured non-verbal interactions and group dynamics that might not have been evident in transcripts alone, providing additional layers of understanding.

My use of AI tools, particularly in document analysis, required additional transparency measures. I developed a systematic plan that prioritized my own analytical thinking first, then strategically employed AI for specific tasks, such as maintaining coding consistency across documents. I documented each step of AI-assisted analysis

carefully, ensuring I could trace and communicate which insights emerged from human analysis versus AI-generated comparisons. This approach complemented traditional analytical methods while, at the same time, provided the benefits of AI tools for pattern recognition, coding consistency, and systematic cross-document analysis.

Study Limitations

This study had several limitations worth noting. The small sample size, while allowing for depth of analysis, limited the generalizability of findings beyond the experience of the four TEs in the study. Additionally, my position as both researcher and TE offered an insider perspective but also created potential for bias in data collection and interpretation. Additionally, the five-month timeframe captured a snapshot of TE agency rather than tracking how agency might evolve over extended periods of professional practice.

Despite these limitations, the study offered valuable insights into how the four TEs in the study achieved agency within AOSA Teacher Education. These limitations suggest the need for additional research exploring TE agency across additional settings, incorporating multiple perspectives, and examining how agency and culturally responsive teaching develop longitudinally within established pedagogical traditions. Despite these limitations, the integration of teacher agency and culturally responsive teaching revealed in this study offers insights with implications that extend beyond AOSA Teacher Education.

Closing

By triangulating data from multiple sources, I was able to capture both the complexity and nuance of how the TEs in this study perceived and used their agency in AOSA Teacher Education. The integration of ecological teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018), and communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) provided complementary lenses for understanding both how and why TEs exercised agency. These methodological choices revealed key insights into TE agency within AOSA's organizational context, which I examine in the following chapters.

CHAPTER FOUR: TEACHER EDUCATOR PROFILES & AOSA CURRICULUM ANALYSIS (PHASE I FINDINGS)

In this chapter I present findings from my study exploring teacher educator (TE) agency within the American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA), with data organized chronologically across two chapters. In this chapter, I first provide an overview of the three key findings that emerged from the complete data set, serving as conceptual threads that connect all data sources. I then present Phase I analysis through examination of AOSA curriculum materials, examining both enduring elements and notable changes in program curriculum policy. The chapter concludes with TE profiles developed from individual interviews, highlighting each participant's unique background and approach. In Chapter 5, I extend this analysis with Phase 2 findings from focus group discussions and participant reflections, culminating in a synthesis that addresses the research questions.

The findings that emerged challenged my initial research assumptions in compelling ways, as the data revealed a surprising reconceptualization of the traditional-innovative dichotomy I had initially proposed. My first research question—How do Orff Schulwerk TEs perceive and use their TE agency to serve as arbiters of tradition or instigators of change?—framed TEs as either tradition arbiters or change instigators, but not both simultaneously. Contrary to this initial framing, the data revealed a more nuanced reality. The participants demonstrated that they did not perceive tradition and innovation as competing forces, but rather as complementary components within an evolving educational framework. Evidence of teacher agency emerged in their narratives of thoughtfully blending traditional and innovative practices to support the spectrum of

learning profiles in their courses.

Equally unexpected were the insights that emerged regarding institutional constraints. My exploration of the second research question—How does TE agency achievement of agency align or conflict with the aims of the American Orff-Schulwerk Association?—revealed that the most considerable constraints on TE agency stemmed not from AOSA policy, but from unspoken power dynamics embedded within the organization. Notably, the focus group created space for participants to build mutual support networks and develop a shared understanding of cultural barriers.

Overview of Key Findings

The following synthesis distills three key findings that emerged from systematic analysis of multiple data sources. These findings illuminated the complex relationship between TE agency and institutional culture in AOSA Teacher Education, revealing both progress toward and persistent barriers to TE agency:

1. ***Individual Integration.*** Rather than positioning themselves as arbiters of tradition or instigators of change, individual TEs transcended this binary by artfully integrating traditional Orff Schulwerk principles and innovative adaptive strategies in their courses to cultivate culturally responsive spaces. This culturally responsive reimagining of Orff Schulwerk aligned with AOSA’s expressed commitment to inclusive music education.
2. ***Cultural Barriers.*** Despite organizational policy advancements toward inclusion and evidence of TE agency at the instructional level, implicit social hierarchies within AOSA constrained TE agency and impeded system-wide implementation

of culturally responsive teaching. This constraint took the form of credential gatekeeping, racial bias, and inequitable power structures.

3. ***Power of Dialogue.*** Through focus group participation, TEs forged a network of mutual support and collectively identified cultural barriers within AOSA. This emergent professional learning community model illustrated the potential of intentional collaboration among AOSA TEs.

The evidence that yielded these key findings will be presented systematically in the remainder of Chapter 4 and throughout Chapter 5. Next, I present findings from document analysis, which traces AOSA's organizational evolution with respect to curriculum policy. The chapter concludes with TE profiles for each of the four study participants, highlighting the notable themes and insights that surfaced during individual interviews, providing context for the experiences that shaped this study.

Document Analysis: AOSA's Curriculum Policy Evolution

A comparative analysis of the AOSA Teacher Education Curriculum and Course Handbook versions 4.0 (2012) and 5.0 (2024) revealed both AOSA's commitment to preserving core Orff Schulwerk traditions and its efforts to address contemporary educational needs, particularly regarding diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA). By seeking out both enduring elements and notable changes, the analysis illuminated how AOSA curriculum policy has evolved in alignment with inclusive education aims, though it remains unclear whether these changes represent primarily symbolic gestures or substantive commitments to institutional change. Regardless of their origin, these policy developments clearly signal a formal organizational move toward

more culturally inclusive and adaptive approaches that TEs have been implementing in practice. The following section examines the enduring elements that have remained consistent in AOSA curriculum policy between 2012 and 2024.

Enduring Elements

A comparative analysis of the 2012 and 2024 curriculum documents revealed AOSA's centering of traditional Orff Schulwerk principles. These enduring elements, grounded in the fundamental concept of *musiké* (unity of music, dance, speech), provide a stable foundation for teacher education programs across the United States. Through the preservation of enduring Orff Schulwerk principles and practices, this stability safeguards methodological integrity from fleeting educational trends.

Core Philosophical Framework. The curriculum's core philosophical framework (consisting of experiential learning, artistic development, and pedagogical understanding) grounds conceptual development. Orff Schulwerk-inspired educators draw inspiration from a dynamic four-stage teaching process (preliminary play, imitation, exploration, improvisation) to facilitate creative development. This process-oriented approach prioritizes sound before symbol in music literacy, balancing experiential learning with performance outcomes while supporting development across multiple domains, including intellectual growth through critical thinking, social development through group cooperation, emotional growth through self-expression, and aesthetic development through artistic judgment. Building on this philosophical foundation, the curriculum also maintains a consistent approach to skill development.

Sequential Development Structure. The curriculum's sequential structure provides a comprehensive matrix for skill development across three certification levels. This carefully scaffolded progression integrates musical elements (time, rhythm, meter, melody, form, timbre) with pedagogical applications through experiential, conceptual, and pedagogical components. Teacher-participants are positioned to experience cumulative growth through this sequence, building from basic skills to advanced artistic expression while developing practical classroom applications that maintain methodological integrity yet allow for contextual adaptation.

Analysis of these curriculum documents revealed how AOSA's sustained commitment to the core philosophical framework and sequential development structure has provided consistent pedagogical grounding over the last decade. The preservation of these foundational elements creates conditions for meaningful innovation by establishing clear parameters around Orff Schulwerk's essential methodology while enabling responsive practice across educational settings. Having established these enduring elements, the following section examines how the curriculum evolved from 2012 to 2024 in response to changing educational contexts.

Key Areas of Evolution

Analysis of the 2012 and 2024 curriculum documents also revealed policy changes that reflect AOSA's response to contemporary educational needs. These changes emerged across five interconnected domains: (1) Institutional Commitment to DEIA, (2) Organizational Governance, (3) Leadership Representation, (4) Curriculum Expansion, and (5) Pedagogical Support. Each domain demonstrates AOSA's evolution from

traditional structures toward more inclusive and responsive approaches to music education.

Institutional Commitment to DEIA. AOSA has institutionalized its commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) through comprehensive structural and programmatic changes. At the leadership level, this includes creating a Vice President for DEIA position, implementing mandatory DEIA training for TEs, and broadening participation in curriculum development through more inclusive collaborative structures. The organization has formalized participant rights through bias and discrimination reporting systems, requirements for inclusive facilities, and policies on preferred names and pronouns. Access and accommodation policies have been considerably expanded, with new requirements for comprehensive support systems and differentiated instruction designed to support all participants regardless of their learning needs or challenges.

Organizational Governance. Alongside these DEIA initiatives, AOSA implemented structural changes to strengthen organizational governance. The organization has both standardized certain policies and increased flexibility in others, creating clearer parameters for TEs' work. Policy standardization is evident in several areas: the formal designation of a "Certificate of Completion" for three-level credential, expanded academic integrity guidelines, detailed financial procedures for chapter-run courses, and comprehensive course cancellation protocols. Simultaneously, the organization has become more flexible in other areas, exemplified by the shift from "two-week" to "ten-day" course length specifications.

Leadership and Representation. Building on these governance changes, AOSA has also strategically redesigned how leadership and representation function in respect to curriculum policy. The transformation of AOSA's curriculum leadership structure represents a shift from an elite cohort of experts to a broader, more representative model. The curriculum and course handbook documents now emerge from broad-based committee work rather than a centralized approach, most notably through the replacement of the original steering committee with a Curriculum Oversight and Review Subcommittee. This restructuring has expanded both the number and diversity of contributors in leadership roles while implementing a more systematic review process. Importantly, AOSA has balanced this expansion with continuity by retaining several contributors from 2012 through 2024, ensuring the preservation of institutional knowledge while growing leadership diversity. The result is a more dynamic and inclusive approach to curriculum development that maintains connections to organizational history while embracing new perspectives.

Curriculum Expansion. AOSA has broadened both its curricular content and educational goals between 2012 and 2024, reflecting its commitment to inclusive education. The scope of musical materials has expanded beyond original Orff Schulwerk resources to include diverse genres, such as jazz, blues, rock, pop, classical, and world music. This expansion encourages TEs to draw from varied sources, reflecting a broader aesthetic understanding that encompasses multiple musical environments and traditions. Within the curriculum document itself, new sections address culturally relevant teaching practices, enhanced equity considerations in teaching materials, and annual reviews

through an equity lens. These changes extend to content selection, with problematic materials being removed and culturally relevant materials added.

The organization has also reconceptualized its educational aims and benefits to align with contemporary priorities. While maintaining emphasis on intellectual and social development, the 2024 curriculum introduces emotional growth as a key outcome, specifically identifying “joy” as an explicit benefit of Orff Schulwerk participation. The shift from “leadership” to “community” development as a social goal reflects evolving educational priorities. These expanded goals are supported by more inclusive language throughout the curriculum documents, including the adoption of gender-neutral pronouns in alignment with contemporary educational terminology.

Pedagogical Support. Notably, AOSA's 2024 curriculum enhances the resources and models available to TEs who facilitate Orff Schulwerk teacher education courses. The updated curriculum provides clearer guidance and more comprehensive supports, equipping TEs to respond and adapt to participant needs while honoring their professional judgment. These enhanced resources include detailed progression maps for elemental forms and meters across levels, specific process teaching strategies, and comprehensive guidance for improvisation development. These frameworks are designed to better prepare TEs to implement culturally responsive teaching, including guidance for applying Orff Schulwerk processes to materials from different traditions and integrating cultural awareness throughout their instruction of course participants.

The practical implementation of these policies is supported through enhanced assessment and documentation frameworks. The curriculum provides structural support

through examples of movement idea development, lesson planning, and process analysis, while incorporating flexibility for pre-teaching preparation, multiple entry points, and differentiation strategies. A pre-course participant survey is designed to help TEs better understand and respond to student backgrounds and needs, while specific guidance for written assignments, teaching strategy documentation, and student progress evaluation supports consistent standards. These resources support TEs in creating inclusive and accessible learning environments that balance structure with flexibility. Through these enhanced supports, AOSA demonstrated its commitment to maintaining methodological consistency while supporting responsive practice.

Synthesis: Emergence of a Culturally Responsive Approach

Analysis of these organizational changes revealed AOSA's systematic transformation toward a more fully realized culturally responsive music education approach through multiple, interconnected initiatives. The expansion of musical content beyond traditional Orff Schulwerk materials demonstrates a commitment to broader cultural representation, reinforced through structural changes in leadership, systematic review processes, and mandatory training requirements. The organization's emphasis on inclusive practices extended from policy-level decisions to classroom-level implementation through enhanced pedagogical supports and flexible assessment approaches. These five key areas of evolution—commitment to DEIA, organizational governance, leadership and representation, curriculum expansion, and pedagogical support—work together to support culturally responsive teaching. The changes reflect a deliberate shift from preserving traditions for their own sake to leveraging traditions to

meet contemporary participant needs. AOSA has created conditions that simultaneously uphold methodological integrity and enable responsive practice across varied educational contexts. Although this document analysis revealed important organizational shifts, understanding how these changes manifest in real-world settings requires examining the lived experiences of those who implement them. The following TE profiles offer insight into how AOSA's institutional changes translate into TE practice.

Teacher Educator Profiles

The following profiles serve as an introduction to the four TE participants in this study, whose unique backgrounds and experiences reflect the diversity within AOSA Teacher Education. Through their narratives, these TEs revealed a purposeful approach to their agency in relation to Orff Schulwerk traditions. They demonstrated that their goal was not preservation for its own sake, but rather leveraging traditional foundations to support relevant and engaging music education experiences.

Eva, Program Founder and Access Champion

Eva, a Filipino-American TE from the west coast, illuminated how personal histories and professional obstacles can shape one's commitment to inclusive music education. Recognizing needs in her community, she developed an Orff Schulwerk teacher education program at her local state university to support and strengthen music education in her region. Her efforts to establish the course exposed challenging dynamics within the AOSA community, cultivating her resolve to prioritize access and inclusion and forge her own path. Eva actualized her vision despite concerns about regional competition.

Eva's cultural background shaped her approach to education and leadership. Growing up as a first-generation Filipino American during a wave of Filipino immigration in the 1960s and 1970s, she navigated complex cultural pressures around assimilation, language, and career expectations. When Eva and her siblings were placed in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes despite their English proficiency, her father's intervention revealed both the institutional bias at play and the difficult choices immigrant families face:

Being as Americanized as possible was prevalent in my household—just looking up to American culture, and wanting to speak English ... My parents still spoke to us in Tagalog until we moved [from another US state] when I was in first grade. We told the school system that we were learning the Filipino language at home, and they immediately put us into ESL. My parents, my dad in particular, was very angry about that—very indignant. He stormed into the office and said, “My daughter shouldn't be in ESL!” And so they changed the form, and he said, “We're speaking English from now on.” They didn't speak to us in Tagalog anymore at home.

This early confrontation with institutional biases and the subsequent loss of her heritage language at home instilled in Eva a deep awareness of how educational systems can silence cultural identities—a realization that would later fuel her commitment to creating inclusive spaces where all voices could be heard.

Eva's understanding of cultural silencing deepened through her observation of hierarchical patterns within Filipino culture that, although seen as traditionally respectful,

could become problematic when reinforced by educational systems that stifle agency and student voice. This recognition of how cultural deference intersects with institutional power structures would become central to her educational philosophy:

Given my background and identity as a Filipino American, I see how young people are often silenced. There's this perpetual bowing down to authority and eldership—don't go against your teachers, don't go against your parents. It wasn't until I experienced people not really helping me, trying to control me, that I saw how this is built into education systems.

This realization shaped her approach to leadership, leading her to question traditional hierarchical structures.

Eva's path to program development emerged from recognizing a critical gap in her region's music education landscape. The state had only two Orff Schulwerk certification programs, which she perceived as a severe shortage of professional development opportunities. Rather than accepting these limitations, she developed OPUS (Orff Project for Urban Schools) through a local university, an innovative program designed to facilitate learning for pre-service teachers in Orff Schulwerk while simultaneously providing music education to underserved elementary schools in her area.

When Eva later pursued founding an official AOSA Teacher Education program at the same institution, her requests for guidance and support from her mentors were met with quiet avoidance. "I think there are a lot of people not wanting to share, which is understandable," she reflected. From Eva's perspective, the existing program attracted participants from all over the world, whereas her focus was on supporting local teachers.

Despite those challenges, Eva remained determined. “I was navigating those dynamics, not wanting to upset my elders and teachers, but also seeing this gap in access,” she recalled. Even when Eva’s first application to become a TE was not accepted in 2017, she remained steadfast in her original purpose: “I realized I didn't need to be a Level I teacher at that time—I just wanted to start a course. I didn't care who taught it.”

Ultimately, this determination paid off. By 2019, Eva had established an AOSA Teacher Education program at her local state university, and by 2023, the program had expanded to offer all three levels. At the time of this study, Eva had become a Level I TE, and her program served a mix of educators, primarily from the public schools but also from private schools and some pre-service music educators. Through this work, Eva used her agency to challenge conventional notions of territory and deference to elders and instead focused on cultivating new spaces for growth.

Mary, Bridge Builder & Nurturing Mentor

Mary, a TE from the South, brought unique perspectives to the study as both the most experienced of the four TEs and as one of the few African-American TEs in the AOSA. Her work at the first Orff Schulwerk certification program at a historically Black college and university (HBCU) signified a commitment to expanding access to communities long underrepresented in AOSA. In doing so, she helped bridge the rich cultural traditions and perspectives of HBCUs with the AOSA community, enriching the organization with new connections and viewpoints.

Mary's connection to Orff Schulwerk began in childhood, creating a foundation that would later influence her commitment to teaching and mentoring others. "I am an

Orff baby,” she explained. “I started in first grade in the Orff music classroom and fell in love with Orff back then. I can remember the Dorian mode from elementary school.”

This early formative experience instilled in her a deep commitment to the Orff Schulwerk approach that would later drive her work as a TE.

Mary’s journey to teacher education was accelerated by institutional support and mentorship. After teaching for six years in a rural school in her home state, she was invited to teach at the state’s largest urban district, which had received an \$800,000 federal grant for music teacher professional development. “My coordinator pushed me and fellow teachers into presenting at the district level the very first year after Level I,” she recalled. This early mentorship proved crucial, as the same coordinator later encouraged her to apply to become a TE.

Mary’s teaching philosophy centers on maintaining high standards while, at the same time, facilitating supportive learning environments. This dual commitment was evident in her approach when some course participants struggled with course demands. “Teaching levels courses is very challenging because you can lose teachers and you can damage them,” she observed. “I believe the Orff courses have also hurt people by making them feel small if they can’t do certain things.” She described a poignant moment with a student who became visibly frustrated during class:

He was glaring through me ... It just melted my heart and broke me—to see some of my young men, in particular ... anybody that has not gone through a traditional college music theory course—to struggle as he did.

Rather than lowering her standards when course participants struggled, Mary provided

extensive additional support: “I stayed after school—I stayed after classes with them. I let them email me throughout the night if I can help.” For Mary, the measure of good teaching was not who could keep up, but who was helped to rise.

Though Mary has taught at courses across the country, the HBCU Orff program held a special place in her heart. “Being on the HBCU campus, the creativity of the participants—it feels like home for me. [The participants] just start harmonizing on day one. You just start a song and rhythms break out,” she explained. Although the program may include more African-American musical traditions than might be found at other courses, Mary emphasized that “the course is not just for African-American teachers. We have teachers of several races and from several states ... who wanted to be there.” She suggested the rich cultural environment attracted a diverse participant pool, many who appreciated both the welcoming atmosphere and the course’s cultural responsiveness. Through her work, Mary demonstrated how TEs could embrace Orff Schulwerk traditions while adapting to serve specific communities, creating inclusive environments and breaking down historical barriers to access.

Crystal, Community Builder & Responsive Educator

Crystal's path to becoming a TE began during her own teacher education experience, during which she discovered a passion for Orff Schulwerk that would shape her career. Although the youngest TE in this study, Crystal brought rich perspective from teaching across diverse school settings: rural and urban communities, public and independent schools, Title I and wealthy districts across multiple regions of the United States.

Crystal's journey was motivated by a challenging childhood encounter with an unsupportive elementary music teacher—an experience that left a lasting impression and ultimately inspired her to create better experiences for future generations. “I was a kid who thought I couldn't sing because of the way my elementary music teacher conducted class,” Crystal recalled. “I wanted to be in the volunteer choir—an after-school, optional thing—and I didn't make it, and I didn't know why.” This formative experience shaped her belief that music education should be inclusive and nurturing rather than exclusionary.

A transformative moment occurred during Crystal's Level II course experience, which cemented her commitment to Orff Schulwerk. She recounted, “I clearly remember a moment sitting in front of [the TE] at a xylophone when I gasped out loud. I think a light bulb shone above my head because he smirked at me.” Crystal continued:

[My TE] was breaking down a very complex xylophone piece into this melodic and rhythmic skeleton and then slowly building it back up. I could hear it in my head ... I was starting to live in the style of what Keetman and Orff wrote down. This powerful learning experience influenced how she would later approach scaffolding instruction for her own students.

Crystal's unique contribution to Orff Schulwerk teacher education emerged from her extensive experience teaching across diverse communities. Having taught in predominantly Black and Hispanic Title I schools in the South, Native American communities in the Midwest, and now at a prestigious independent school on the east coast, she brought nuanced understanding of how cultural and regional contexts shape

learning. Crystal explained, “In [a state in the South], I taught for [city name] Schools—all of my schools were 100% Title I—and I guess you could say minority majority.”

Crystal continued:

That really taught me a lot in my first few years of teaching about what it feels like to feel othered—to be in a space where the kids look at you, and they don't necessarily trust you because they don't relate to you immediately, just looking at you.

This awareness informed Crystal's culturally responsive approach to teacher education, where she aims to adapt her methods to meet the unique needs of each group of teacher-participants. Taking inspiration from a TE colleague not in this study, Crystal described her implementation of a “Homework Lab” approach. Rather than providing direct feedback on assignments, she first invites participants to work together in small groups: “I do a more cursory glance at everybody's [assignments], notice themes, and then have them play [for each other],” she explained. “I think it's more important that they see their mistakes themselves without me having to name the mistake.” She suggested this collaborative approach builds community while also providing differentiated support, reflecting Crystal's commitment to creating inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Crystal's story illustrates how childhood experiences can shape an educator's agency and mission. Now, Crystal uses that agency to cultivate supportive, inclusive spaces where students learn from each other, the goals are clear, and everyone receives the support they need to succeed. Her journey from a child who “couldn't sing” to a TE

who champions collaborative learning demonstrates how personal adversity can become a powerful force for transformation.

Max, Legacy Preserver & Program Innovator

At the time of this study, Max led one of the longest-running Orff Schulwerk teacher education programs in the United States, serving as both course director and Level I TE in a large metropolitan area. When his predecessors had to step away from their duties unexpectedly during the pandemic, Max stepped into leadership, preserving and advancing a program that had operated continuously for over four decades.

Max's connection to Orff Schulwerk began with an immediate sense of belonging. "From the minute I sat down in [the Level I Basic] class—I was there in the back—it was like I was home right away," he recalled. "All the play that I had always done with the kids—now it had a purpose." His Level I experience built upon his previous teaching approaches, offering greater focus and structure, particularly for his work with underserved students: "When I worked in the South Bronx, I mean, these kids—they had nothing. And they would come to my room and have fun, and they thrived. They'd come to school because they had music."

What distinguishes Max's leadership is his direct connection to the origins of Orff Schulwerk through his mentor, who was among the first cohort of students at the Orff Institute in Salzburg. "[His mentor] lived in Orff's house. She lived with the guy, and she had personal relationships with Keetman and him and Barbara Hasselbach. She knew them all firsthand," Max explained. This lineage fostered a powerful sense of responsibility to her legacy:

The reason that keeps and will continue to keep me here in [this city] for a long time is the course that started here many years ago. I owe it to her and to all that she is to keep it going.

What made Max's program distinctive was its year-long structure, which differed from the typical two-week summer intensive format used by most Orff Schulwerk teacher education programs. Rather than compressing coursework into an intensive block, teachers met weekly throughout the academic year, allowing them to play with new ideas immediately in their classrooms. "I love [our] program. I like what it offers. I like that it's different," Max explained. "There's such power in learning something and trying it out with your kids the next day and then being able to come back and talk with other people—colleagues—about this and that."

This approach was particularly valuable in addressing the isolation often experienced by music teachers in the [large metropolitan area], where "we don't have a department of music. There's no standard. Every school is very different," Max noted. "There are four schools on my block, and I don't know any of the music teachers. So, I say this: Our Orff community does become family." Beyond pedagogical preparation, the program provided key emotional and professional support in an urban environment where music teachers often worked without standardized frameworks or colleague networks.

While under his leadership, Max had made the program more accessible by reducing tuition costs and creating flexible participation options: "We reduced the tuition to \$850 if you're paying out of pocket. We actually were able to get some people that normally probably wouldn't have taken the course because of the cost." Through these

measures, Max demonstrated how tradition and innovation could coexist, preserving a historic program's legacy while adapting it to meet contemporary urban teachers' needs.

Synthesis of Portraits

These TE portraits reveal how contextual factors, including childhood experiences, cultural backgrounds, encounters with resistance, influenced how these TEs understood and used their agency. Whether establishing new programs to expand access like Eva, preserving long-standing traditions while adapting to urban needs like Max, creating supportive environments like Crystal, or working to maintain high standards while providing differentiated support like Mary, each TE achieved agency as they adapted and innovated to meet the needs of their students and communities.

The individual profiles illuminate shared challenges and unique perspectives in Orff Schulwerk teacher education, informing the focus group design and guiding the selection of discussion protocols and topics for collective exploration. All four participants grappled with maintaining program standards or traditions while working to make Orff Schulwerk accessible and relevant to broader communities. Their experiences highlighted several key areas where TE agency manifested: challenging unspoken territorial boundaries and deference expectations, bridging cultural traditions with organizational structures, creating innovative program structures that serve local communities, and building inclusive networks that break down historical barriers to access. In the focus group sessions, these individual experiences converged in collective discourse about AOSA Teacher Education, revealing patterns and possibilities for advancing more inclusive and effective music education through Orff Schulwerk.

These individual narratives provide crucial insight into how AOSA's organizational evolution toward culturally responsive music education—visible in the curriculum's expanded commitment to DEIA, restructured governance, diversified leadership, broadened curricular content, and enhanced pedagogical supports—actually showed up in practice. Although policy documents signaled AOSA's intention to leverage traditions to meet contemporary participant needs, these TEs demonstrated how such policies translated into lived experiences across varied educational contexts, revealing both the progress made and the work still needed to fully realize AOSA's culturally responsive vision.

CHAPTER FIVE: FOCUS GROUPS & PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

(PHASE II FINDINGS)

In this study, I investigated how Orff Schulwerk teacher educators (TEs) achieved agency within the American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA), guided by two primary research questions: (1) How do Orff Schulwerk TEs perceive and use their TE agency to serve as arbiters of tradition or instigators of change in AOSA Teacher Education? and (2) How does TEs' achievement of agency align or conflict with the aims of AOSA?

This chapter presents findings from Phase 2 of this study, which centered on focus group discussions and participant reflections from the four TEs profiled in Chapter 4. Building on the foundation established through document analysis and individual interviews, in this chapter I illuminate how collective dialogue catalyzed deeper insights into TE agency. The focus group methodology, intentionally designed based on Phase 1 findings, provided a unique space for participants to collectively explore themes that surfaced during individual interviews.

The focus group discussions revealed a notable evolution in how participants conceptualized their agency. The individual reflections captured in Phase 1 evolved into rich collective sense-making during Phase 2, as participants discovered meaningful connections through storytelling and perspective sharing. Their dialogue illuminated shared experiences through multiple lenses and established foundations for potential institutional transformation. As Max reflected a month after our focus group:

This experience gave me a connection to other TEs in the trenches that I didn't know I was thirsting for. The intimacy and openness fostered by everyone allowed me to be vulnerable sharing my experiences and personal doubts, validated my work as a TE, and pushed me to think of my role in the broader Orff community.

The power of dialogue emerged as a central theme throughout Phase 2.

Participants articulated how the focus group experience created a rare space where collective agency could emerge—one built on trust, vulnerability, and shared purpose—that stood in noticeable contrast to traditional professional development experiences within AOSA. Within this collaborative environment, participants surfaced and processed challenging topics including implicit bias and institutional gatekeeping, recognizing their individual challenges as collective concerns and their expertise as a communal resource rather than individual property. This collaborative process reinforced and deepened the third key finding previewed in Chapter 4—the transformative potential of dialogue among teacher educators. As Eva noted in their audio diary reflection:

I think the way that you organized this focus group and how reflective it was and oriented towards change and improving our craft, or improving our environment and the way that we exist in it—I feel like that is something that could be really valuable.

Building on the three key findings introduced in Chapter 4, this chapter presents a more nuanced understanding of how TEs integrated traditional and innovative moves into their classroom teaching (Finding 1), experienced cultural barriers within the AOSA

community (Finding 2), and encountered the transformative potential of collective dialogue (Finding 3). Through analysis of focus group transcripts and participant reflections, this chapter reveals how TEs actively perceived and used their agency in their work as AOSA teacher educators.

The chapter is structured in three main sections that address the research questions and reflect the key findings:

1. **Individual Integration (RQ1).** Rather than positioning themselves as arbiters of tradition or instigators of change, individual TEs transcended this binary by artfully integrating traditional Orff Schulwerk principles and innovative adaptive strategies in their courses to cultivate culturally responsive spaces. This culturally responsive reimagining of Orff Schulwerk aligned with AOSA's expressed commitment to inclusive music education.
2. **Cultural Barriers (RQ2).** Despite organizational policy advancements toward inclusion and evidence of TE agency at the instructional level, implicit social hierarchies within AOSA constrained TE agency and impeded system-wide implementation of culturally responsive teaching. This constraint took the form of credential gatekeeping, racial bias, and inequitable power structures.
3. **Power of Dialogue.** Through focus group participation, TEs forged a network of mutual support and collectively identified cultural barriers within AOSA. This emergent professional learning community model

illustrated the potential of intentional collaboration among AOSA TEs.

The chapter is organized around the same research questions that guided Phase 1, examining first how Orff Schulwerk TEs perceive and use their agency as instructors to serve as arbiters of tradition or instigators of change in AOSA Teacher Education, and second, how TEs' achievement of agency aligns or conflicts with AOSA's institutional aims. However, the focus group methodology allowed for a more dynamic and interactive exploration of these questions.

What follows is an analysis of how the four participants grappled collectively with questions of tradition, innovation, and institutional culture during our focus group discussions, highlighting moments where their shared dialogue led to new insights and possibilities for action. The chapter concludes by examining how participants' reflections one month after the focus group revealed the lasting impact of this collective experience on their professional identities and sense of agency within AOSA. Although this chapter focuses on surfacing and curating relevant conversation content from the focus group, Chapter 6 will draw connections between these findings and the literature, offering a more comprehensive theoretical discussion of teacher educator agency within AOSA.

Individual Integration (RQ1)

The AOSA teacher educators (TEs) in this study demonstrated a thoughtful integration of traditional Orff Schulwerk principles with situationally responsive teaching practices that incorporated creative and experimental applications. Although I initially conceptualized them as competing priorities, this study revealed that tradition and innovation functioned not as a binary choice but as complementary elements in TEs'

practices. Rather than choosing between preserving historical practices or pursuing change, these TEs skillfully leveraged their grounding in foundational Schulwerk principles (past) to develop responsive practices addressing immediate classroom contexts (present) while simultaneously playing with experimental approaches that pointed toward new pedagogical possibilities (future).

Through analysis of focus group discussions and participant reflections, building on individual interview findings presented in Chapter 4, the data revealed three key approaches through which TEs achieved agency in their instructional practices: (a) anchoring to Orff Schulwerk principles, (b) adapting for cultural responsiveness, and (c) experimenting with learning structures. Together, these approaches demonstrated how TEs achieved agency by drawing upon traditional foundations while actively responding to present needs and playfully reimagining established practices.

Anchoring to Orff Schulwerk Principles

TEs grounded their practice in fundamental Orff Schulwerk principles—philosophical, musical, and pedagogical—demonstrating a deep sense of comfort and confidence in these foundational concepts. They drew on their embodied understanding of Orff Schulwerk, often referencing formative mantras and pivotal learning moments that shaped their understanding. Their narratives included transformative “aha” experiences, deep resonance with the approach upon first encounter, and relief in discovering a pedagogical framework that aligned with their vision of creative music education. Rather than viewing these principles as historical artifacts to be preserved, they transformed Orff Schulwerk concepts into dynamic pedagogical tools, creating

meaningful connections between established wisdom and contemporary music education needs. Their relationships with foundational principles emerged across four key categories: elemental music, holistic development, process teaching, and student-led design—with the last reflecting a common understanding shared by Crystal—that “the soul of a Schulwerk teacher is recognizing the needs of those in front of you.”

Elemental Music. All TEs held a belief that elemental music—simple, foundational musical patterns and processes—provides engaging and accessible music-making opportunities for students. Yet instead of rigidly following models developed by the approach's founders nearly a century ago, they used elemental pieces as models and points of inspiration. Their adaptive approaches reflected a mature understanding of pedagogy—one that can sustain foundational principles without sacrificing responsiveness to evolving learning contexts.

Eva explained, elemental music serves as “a springboard for each individual to grow from where they're at,” amplifying modest creative efforts into meaningful musical outcomes. Eva continued, “elemental music ... is the foundation. It's the access point for everyone The elemental [aspect] is the thing that connects all of us.” The other TEs echoed this commitment to elemental foundations. Max emphasized the universal accessibility that comes from its basic nature, stating, “I truly believe in what the foundations are. And I think it's so elemental, so basic in a sense that it is accessible by so many people. We really need to focus that way.” This commitment to elemental principles as the core of their teaching approach was further reinforced when Mary and Max, discussing what aspects of Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education should remain

unchanged, specifically highlighted the importance of “connecting to the original intent of Orff and Keetman,” which they identified as its “elemental” design.

Holistic Development. Building on this understanding of elemental music, the TEs also framed their practice as a broader, holistic approach to music education that extended beyond music instruction in isolation. This holistic vision integrated movement and music as inseparable components of music learning and expression. Crystal articulated this foundational belief, noting that “kids are inherently musical, and that music class should be a place where they're able to explore their musicality, not just learn songs by rote.” Max broadened this vision further, aiming “to [light] a spark in whoever they are ... not just necessarily to love music, but to love the world that they're in.” Particularly addressing the challenge of engaging students in an increasingly digital world, Max reflected on how physical musical engagement contrasts with screen-based activities that dominate children’s experiences. He observed:

Especially with technology now, I'm thinking how do we [awaken possibility] in our classrooms? Because kids can do a lot of this [gesturing video game play], but when they have to do this [gesturing playing instrument], they can't. So, I think we're trying to develop a whole child or a whole person.

This commitment to nurturing complete musical beings, rather than simply teaching isolated skills, remains a cornerstone of how these TEs conceptualized Orff Schulwerk's enduring value in contemporary education.

Process Teaching. Whether addressing the upper-cased P *Process*—“the practice of exploration, improvisation and creation is used in all aspects of our work”—or lower-

case process, intentional step-by-step lesson design, P/process teaching was a central theme in their conversations about Orff Schulwerk principles. They agreed that process teaching involves starting with something simple and building incrementally through well-scaffolded sequences to help students develop confidence in their skills, sometimes “one small change” at a time. Crystal emphasized:

What's most important as a teacher educator is how to teach the process ... it's not that I want my participants to go away and teach everything that I taught to their own kids. It's more, *how did Crystal teach this? How can I take a song that I want to teach and process it and find avenues for student input?*

Similarly, Max discussed process teaching in relation to adapting musical materials, suggesting the importance of looking at models and then considering, “how do I manipulate and edit [this] so it works and is accessible?” The TEs also discussed the trade-offs between a more teacher-led process-teaching approach with pre-planned sequencing and scaffolding versus giving children an initial seed idea and observing where they take it, which represents more of a self-creation approach.

Student-Led Experiences. The TEs emphasized that authentic Orff Schulwerk teaching emerges from responding to students rather than rigidly following prescribed materials like the “yellow books,” referring to the *Music for Children* Volumes by Orff and Keetman (1977). Building on Crystal’s comment, that “the soul of a Schulwerk teacher is recognizing the needs of those in front of you,” Mary articulated the balance between honoring tradition and adapting to student needs:

There are some things that need to be held on to if we're going to call ourselves [Orff Schulwerk teachers]. But if we want to call ourselves something else, the whole world is open ... I'm an Orff Schulwerk teacher—that is my foundation—but I'm going to do whatever it takes to keep my kids' attention, whatever that might be.

Mary continued by acknowledging that this might mean expanding her pedagogical toolkit while remaining grounded in Orff principles:

So, if I need to learn modern band, then I need to get to work on that. I can't say that all I do is Orff Schulwerk—no. But it is my basis, and it's what I believe in the most.

This conversation about teaching in a student-centered way created a natural bridge for the TEs to consider how they adapted the approach in order to be culturally responsive to their learners.

Adapting for Cultural Responsiveness

Analysis of interviews and focus group discussions revealed that the TEs in this study consistently demonstrated adaptiveness and flexibility motivated by a commitment to cultural responsiveness in their Levels courses. Making in-the-moment decisions to address the specific needs of participants present in each unique learning environment, their practices reflected dedication to honoring both participants' cultural identities and both individual and group characteristics. The following themes emerged regarding how the TEs enacted cultural responsiveness in their practices.

Embracing an Assets-Based Experiential Learning Approach. The TEs aimed to honor participants' cultural knowledge and individual strengths, embracing an assets-based experiential learning approach. To do this, the TEs took time to get to know their adult learners, both their individual and group characteristics, and made real-time adjustments to their teaching approaches. These adaptations reflected their commitment to meeting participants where they were while maintaining pedagogical integrity.

A cornerstone of AOSA Teacher Education involves having participants experience activities from a student's perspective before analyzing them as teachers, structuring activities to progress from embodied music and movement experiences (imitation and exploration) to creation opportunities (improvisation). This process ensures that participants fully engage with each learning stage before moving to analysis and provides opportunities for TEs to observe the strengths and needs of teacher-participants, providing insights into how to make adaptations in the planned learning sequence. As Max explained, “We try to give [participants] the experience of being a student ...the amount of play that is involved ... and the creativity and spontaneity.” All of the TEs expressed a commitment to this experiential, where teacher-participants step into the students’ shoes, as they agreed it provides perspective, so teachers were better equipped to validate children's perspectives when they returned to their own classrooms.

Mary, in particular, noted her commitment to creating opportunities for participants to make unique contributions to the collective. This approach might have involved inviting a talented pianist to contribute from the keyboard or a Spanish-speaking participant to share authentic pronunciation. “The Orff approach provides an opportunity

for everyone to bring their best into the classroom,” she emphasized. This inclusive approach extended to cultural knowledge integration in one of Mary’s course share sessions (performances), exemplified when a Korean participant shared detailed context about traditional song “Arirang” with peers.

The effectiveness of combining experiential learning with an assets-based approach was evident in participant responses. Mary observed that end-of-course “share sessions” became especially memorable because of the unique strengths each cohort brought to their performances, making each one “so creative and different.” She elaborated, “I love to see what creativity, knowledge, and skill others bring to a space.” This approach clearly energized both TEs and teacher-participants, as evidenced by one teacher-participant's enthusiastic declaration after a share session: “I was going to retire, but I think I can do another five years now!”

Navigating Curriculum Guidelines Through a Culturally Responsive Lens. A critical aspect of the TE’s cultural responsiveness revealed itself in how they interpreted the AOSA Teacher Curriculum. Generally, the four TEs viewed the curriculum guidelines not as rigid requirements, but rather as helpful foundations. Mary, in particular, expressed feeling “a sense of responsibility to teach what is there with fidelity,” yet all four TEs also felt comfortable adapting aspects of the curriculum guidelines to attune to different cultural contexts and learning styles. Eva framed her approach as backward design, “starting with [my] students and then drawing connections backward to the curriculum.” She explained, “I love the foundation of the standards, but I also think I can get really bogged down with it.”

Mary's responsiveness came through in her flexible thinking about mastery expectations and skill development timing. She advocated for recognizing that students bring different strengths and follow different learning trajectories, explaining:

I would like to see a little more flexibility about when a student should be able to master [concepts] because this [young teacher] that couldn't do prosody well may be able to play really well. I mean, they may have other skills they can do.

Eva expanded this perspective by highlighting crucial distinctions between different levels of musical proficiency. She argued that TEs need greater clarity about their learning objectives, particularly in distinguishing between foundational skills and advanced mastery: “[We] should better understand our goals—basically the difference between coding literacy and coding fluency.” Eva's distinction clarified that literacy involves basic understanding and ability to decode musical elements, while fluency represents a deeper level of facility and spontaneous application of these skills. This nuanced understanding exemplified how some TEs were able to better support participants at different stages of their learning journey, recognizing that basic literacy in an area might be sufficient for some teaching contexts while working toward greater fluency when appropriate for individual participants' goals.

The tension between upholding standards and ensuring inclusive practice sparked important discussions among TEs, particularly around what they perceived as fundamental skills, like being able to write classroom arrangements for children based on texts. Max commented on a specific challenge he observed:

To rhythmically notate speech was the big thing. And it wasn't just the use of traditional versus non-traditional. It was that there was not an understanding ... of how to consistently speak rhythmically—to hear the prosody of the text and write it down.

Such observations prompted deeper reflection about assessment criteria, with Mary raising an essential question about evaluation, asking “What is the standard? What are we looking for to determine whether or not they're able to [be an effective music teacher]?” Mary was determined to foster “a welcoming and engaging environment for every single person” while, at the same time, ensuring that “the standard is still the standard.” Such questions revealed that cultural responsiveness required not lowering standards but rather reimagining how those standards could be meaningfully achieved.

Modeling Adaptive Practice. Extending beyond the asset-based experiential learning and culturally responsive curriculum approaches outlined above, the TEs in this study embodied cultural responsiveness by explicitly modeling adaptive practice, demonstrating real-time decision making that normalized responsive teaching for teacher-participants. They spoke of navigating unexpected classroom moments, making their decision-making processes transparent. This modeling encompassed more than techniques, embracing a broader philosophy of responsive teaching and continuous learning.

For example, Mary celebrated instances when teacher-participants adapted and even improved her course materials to better fit their own contexts and teaching identities. As Mary noted with enthusiasm, “My favorite part is when they take what I did

and then they do their own thing [with it], and it's better.” This orientation toward encouraging personalization reflected Mary’s understanding that cultural responsiveness requires teachers to adapt materials for their specific students. Rather than expecting exact replication of her process, Mary encouraged teachers to personalize lessons based on their students’ needs and their own strengths.

Crystal echoed this philosophy, drawing from her own developmental journey as a TE. She reflected, “It took a little while for me to realize that I'm not supposed to follow the step-by-step [plan] of how I was taught. It's about recognizing who you're teaching and being effective for them.” Crystal’s insight encapsulated the essence of how TEs' modeling of adaptive practice helped participants move beyond simple mimicry to develop culturally responsive approaches suited to their own teaching contexts.

This philosophy of adaptive practice extended beyond individual lesson planning to encompass entire course structures. The four TEs demonstrated remarkable sensitivity to different learning contexts, making situational judgments and adjusting their approaches based on local conditions. Rather than applying one-size-fits-all solutions, they assessed each teaching context and made responsive decisions that prioritized participant wellbeing and learning effectiveness.

Crystal’s approach exemplified this contextual responsiveness. At one site, she recognized that participants needed additional processing time and provided more in-class work time, noting that “giving [participants] more time to work in class was actually really beneficial for their own mental wellbeing.” In contrast, at another location she observed how participants “are all staying in the dorms together, and they're happy to

sit around in the lounge spaces, playing recorders and working together,” and she structured learning opportunities to capitalize on these natural collaborative dynamics.

Portrait: Reimagining Nursery Rhymes for City Kids. Max's development of “Uncle Pigeon” as an alternative to Mother Goose illustrated how the TEs in this study creatively adapted materials to reflect relevant cultural experiences while preserving core pedagogical principles. Working with urban students for whom traditional nursery rhymes felt disconnected from their daily lives, Max reimagined classic texts rather than simply explaining unfamiliar cultural references. He explained his pedagogical reasoning:

When my little ones do nursery rhymes that are kind of outdated, and we [would] need to teach a whole [lesson] on what porridge is or what a grandfather clock is, it takes away from the musical learning that should be happening.

Max shared his Mother Goose adaptation—“Uncle Pigeon”—with teacher-participants in his course and then invited them to create their own nursery rhymes that followed traditional forms while incorporating experiences familiar to their students. The success of this approach lay in its ability to maintain pedagogical integrity—foundational prosody and elemental form concepts, Max suggested—while enhancing cultural relevance. As Max explained, “It's updating—it's still keeping the same playful, child-centered approach, but it's updating it so it's relevant to the kids.” This example illustrated how TEs can cleverly adapt traditional materials to serve the students they actually teach, creating immediate relevance without shirking pedagogical foundations.

Throughout these examples, TEs made thoughtful judgments about how to respond to local cultural contexts while anchoring approach to core Orff principles. The

four TEs' abilities to evaluate specific situations, assess participant needs, and implement appropriate adaptations—often in real time—revealed how they balanced tradition and innovation in order to achieve culturally responsive practice.

Experimenting with Learning Structures

Building on their anchoring to Orff Schulwerk principles and adapting for cultural responsiveness, the TEs in this study demonstrated a distinctive form of agency through their experimentation with fundamental learning structures. While cultural responsiveness focuses on adapting existing frameworks to honor different backgrounds and creating inclusive environments where all learners feel valued, structural experimentation represents a more transformative approach aimed at reimagining the very architecture of learning itself. This innovation-centered agency manifested not through content modifications, but through process-oriented interventions that challenged conventional assumptions about how knowledge was constructed, validated, and assessed.

These TEs transcended simple adaptations to create novel pathways for learning through reimagined feedback systems, collaborative knowledge frameworks, and boundary-crossing approaches to tradition. Rather than merely adjusting existing structures to accommodate diverse perspectives, these educators designed entirely new scaffolds that redistributed authority, restructured temporal boundaries, and created multidimensional frameworks for mastery. Their experimental approaches reflected a deeper philosophical shift—from viewing educational structures as fixed frameworks to

be navigated to seeing them as malleable systems that could be intentionally redesigned to enhance both effectiveness and accessibility.

Reimagining Feedback as Structural Innovation. The TEs in this study moved beyond traditional assessment by designing iterative feedback loops that fundamentally transformed the typical instructor-student relationship. Rather than simply inviting input, Mary established a dynamic knowledge co-creation system through structured feedback cards where "participants all get a card [. . .]. They write down what they want more of, or what specific things they're looking for." This approach shifted the traditional hierarchical learning model toward a more collaborative framework that could evolve in real-time. By integrating this feedback directly into course design—not just content—Mary and her colleagues experimented with learning design as an emergent, dynamic process.

This experimental approach extended to pedagogical structures. The TEs spoke about reimagining the “I do, we do, you do” sequence as a spiral rather than a linear progression, allowing participants to cycle through different roles as both learners and teachers. This structural innovation created multiple entry points for engagement and challenged conventional assumptions about expertise and authority in education. Beyond restructuring learning sequences, these TEs also reconceptualized them as prototypes for testing educational approaches—each iteration revealing new possibilities for how learning could be organized and experienced.

When course participants expressed that assignments are often the biggest source of stress, the TEs didn't simply extend deadlines but instead restructured the entire

assessment framework. This represented a departure from sequential learning toward a more networked, non-linear structure where participants could revisit and reconfigure concepts throughout the course. Clear rubrics served not as traditional evaluation tools but as compasses for guiding course participants toward mastery.

Technology-Enhanced Assessment Frameworks. Among the TEs, Max's integration of digital tools revolutionized traditional assessment paradigms, fundamentally altering how musical knowledge was created, shared, and evaluated. Max demonstrated this shift, explaining: "When the assignments get more complex, instead of giving written feedback, I give video feedback." This shift from text to multimedia feedback represented more than a simple medium change—it restructured the temporal nature of assessment, creating "a lasting a resource that participants can go back to over and over again." Unlike traditional written feedback or brief verbal feedback, these video assessments created a persistent, non-linear learning environment where participants could engage with instructor insights repeatedly and at their own pace.

Max's technological innovations demonstrated how traditional frameworks could be enhanced without being abandoned. This balance reflected a deeper understanding of how technology could transform feedback from a one-time event into an ongoing resource, fundamentally changing the relationship between instructor, learner, and assessment.

Max's technological innovation reflected broader shifts in musical creation that he had observed:

With our big push on digital technology, I've been thinking about remixing and club music—they are always sampling from each other. So, isn't that what we're doing? Just sampling from each other and taking those little pieces and building something together?

By introducing tools like GarageBand into his teaching practice, Max transformed the traditional composition paradigm into a collaborative digital construction space where participants engaged in shared creation, as Max described: “record this part, you record this part, you come up with something and then they can have it on their own.”

Collaborative Knowledge Construction Models. The TEs' commitment to modeling adaptive practice extended beyond content to the very structures of assessment, explicitly demonstrating how educational frameworks themselves could be subjects of innovation. One TE exemplified this through radical transparency, “owning up to it on Day 2, apologizing, and walking them through how I would fix it” after completely revising an ineffective assignment. This approach transformed assessment from a fixed evaluation into a visible, iterative design process, inviting participants to witness and participate in educational remodeling.

Crystal's “Homework Lab” exemplified this structural reimagining, creating a collaborative assessment environment that challenged traditional feedback delivery methods. Rather than immediately providing individual feedback, Crystal developed an intentionally sequenced process: first reviewing assignments herself to identify common challenges, then facilitating structured peer review sessions where participants played their compositions for each other. As she noted, “It was very rare that they didn't catch

the mistakes either themselves or the group as a whole helped find those errors for fixes.” This approach redistributed evaluative authority throughout the learning community, fundamentally altering power dynamics in assessment.

Mary further developed this collaborative framework to create sustainable support systems that extended beyond individual TE capacity, suggesting “I’ve been thinking of new ways to get [the course participants] to bounce ideas off of themselves so that they can get the resources they need from each other.” This perspective acknowledged both the practical benefits of reducing teacher burnout and recognized that knowledge construction benefits from multiple interpretations—“hearing another person say it, how they say it makes a difference”—challenging the assumption that instructor feedback should be privileged above peer insights. Crystal observed that learning becomes “more concrete when you are able to identify the mistake yourself and then fix it,” highlighting how her collaborative structure engages participants in the metacognitive aspects of assessment, transforming them from passive recipients of evaluation to active agents in knowledge construction. These approaches allowed the TEs to maintain high expectations while redistributing the responsibility for learning, all while supporting TE sustainability.

Boundary Crossing: Theoretical Frameworks for Innovation. TEs developed ways of thinking about innovation that enabled them to transcend the false tradition-innovation dichotomy. Rather than positioning these as opposing forces, Max articulated a “blending” approach that reconceptualized how different musical traditions could be integrated, noting that, “I think we should [include] modern band. How can we

incorporate that? ... Let's bring them together rather than dismiss it.” This perspective illustrated a structural innovation in how music education itself could be conceptualized—not as separate, competing traditions but as complementary approaches that could coexist within a unified framework. Max's observation that “every culture has a wind instrument, like a recorder” demonstrated how this boundary-crossing approach identifies structural parallels between seemingly disparate traditions, creating new possibilities for integration.

Crystal's “doorway” metaphor offered another compelling lens for understanding innovation within established structures:

I don't consider myself an innovator, but I do consider myself in the position to open the doorway for others who maybe can be those innovators ... So, I want to help people feel like they can innovate in Orff Schulwerk. And they're not just stuck in the yellow books.

Crystal's reference to the “yellow books”—the foundational *Music for Children* volumes by Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman that serve as canonical pedagogical texts—revealed her understanding of innovation as expansion rather than rejection of tradition. By positioning herself as a facilitator rather than an innovator, Crystal reframed innovation as authorized exploration, creating conceptual space for participants to reimagine traditional structures while remaining grounded in the core pedagogical principles.

Max further developed this thinking by drawing explicit connections to contemporary artistic practices. He observed, “In [my large urban city], one of the things that the arts department does is create multi-genre artistry. And that really sticks out

because so many artists now do crossover—Beyonce just came out with a country album.” By connecting educational innovation to broader cultural shifts, Max established a theoretical basis for understanding boundary crossing as part of larger artistic evolution. His insight that the Schulwerk offers a way “to explore by taking the elemental pieces and recreating something new” positioned traditional elements not as fixed forms but as building blocks for innovative structures.

This developmental approach to innovation was also evident in the TEs’ personal growth. Mary’s reflection on her own journey—“I’m trying to push myself [toward innovation] a little bit more ... I’m such a literal thinker ... it’s one of the things I’m trying to break out of”—demonstrated how TEs themselves navigated the developmental process of becoming innovative. Through questioning traditional boundaries, these educators discovered that thoughtfully expanding them often led to more meaningful learning experiences. Rather than viewing boundary crossing as compromise, they leveraged it to enhance the relevance and impact of Orff Schulwerk. Their open-minded thinking enabled them to move fluidly between honoring tradition and creating innovative structures for contemporary educational contexts.

Mary’s reconceptualization of standards exemplified this innovative thinking. Rather than viewing standards as fixed endpoints reached through predetermined paths, she reframed them as flexible frameworks that could generate “the feeling of ultimate pride in their individual growth and ability,” while acknowledging that struggles in one area did not define a teacher’s overall musicianship. This approach transformed the traditional assessment model from a single-pathway, deficit-focused system to a multi-

dimensional framework that recognized the diverse ways musical understanding could develop and be demonstrated—a structural innovation that addressed the tension between tradition and innovation that these TEs navigated in their practice.

Cultural Barriers: Institutional Constraints on TE Agency (RQ2)

Although AOSA had made notable policy advancements toward inclusion and equity, focus group discussions revealed persistent implicit social hierarchies that continued to constrain the agency of the TEs in this study. Participants' narratives illuminated their complex lived experiences working within AOSA Teacher Education culture and structure, revealing incongruities between individual TE agency and institutional aims.

The focus group served as a space where the TEs could candidly discuss their perceptions of disconnect between official organizational rhetoric and unspoken cultural norms. As Crystal, Eva, Mary, and Max shared their experiences, a pattern emerged showing how institutional commitments to cultural responsiveness were impeded by entrenched social hierarchies that preserved traditional power dynamics. These hierarchies manifested as implicit bias, gatekeeping practices, and inequitable power structures that critically impacted each participant in unique ways. Their willingness to share both personal struggles and collective wisdom, while holding space for one another to process painful experiences, revealed layers of complexity in navigating the organization's social landscape.

Analysis of the focus group data revealed that barriers to TE agency operated systematically across multiple levels of the organization. The TEs' accounts

demonstrated how implicit social hierarchies and gatekeeping mechanisms function beneath explicit institutional policies, undermining AOSA's implementation of cultural responsiveness and creating ongoing tension between stated aims and daily practices. These barriers represent systemic patterns rather than individual challenges, affecting multiple dimensions of organizational participation and leadership. The following analysis examines these constraints through two primary dimensions: material and geographic factors, and cultural and systemic power structures that limit access and agency within AOSA.

Institutional Progress and Support

Although AOSA has made considerable strides in institutionalizing its commitment to DEIA through concrete policy changes and systematic reviews, several barriers to access persist. Nevertheless, AOSA has established various mechanisms that support teacher agency, which I will explore in detail. These organizational shifts have created enabling conditions for TEs to implement culturally responsive practices with institutional support, as evidenced through the implementation of AOSA's DEIA statement and updated frameworks for examining teaching materials, practices, and policies. Eva's experience illustrated this institutional evolution, noting that "AOSA has been receptive when I asked questions. [The AOSA Professional Development Director] provides information and lets me choose what works best [for our setting]."

The timing of these institutional changes has proven particularly meaningful for new TEs entering the organization. Crystal reflected on this shift, noting "I haven't had any complaints about teaching songs that people don't think should be taught anymore,"

highlighting how AOSA's explicit commitment to inclusion has created conditions where culturally responsive adaptation can happen naturally within the classroom setting. Eva's participation on “the AOSA ad hoc committee during [the COVID-19 pandemic] as they were starting to identify systemic issues by working with [DEIA consultant] Nicole Robinson” further demonstrates the organization's willingness to examine institutional barriers to inclusion.

Despite these positive changes, two categories of barriers continued to limit agency related to access and participation for the TEs in this study. Material barriers, including financial constraints, time commitments, and geographic limitations, created practical obstacles to participation that disproportionately affected certain populations. More pervasive and complex were the cultural and systemic barriers that operated through implicit hierarchies, credential gatekeeping, and racial bias, often working invisibly to constrain TE agency. Crystal’s experience with making inclusive adaptations—such as modifying lyrics for non-binary students and creating more inclusive family language—exemplified this new normal within AOSA Teacher Education. The following sections examine how material, cultural, and systemic barriers continue to affect participation in AOSA, even as the organization works toward greater inclusion.

Material and Geographic Barriers

The analysis of material barriers within AOSA Teacher Education revealed three primary constraints that affected participation, thus limiting TE agency: financial barriers, time commitments, and geographic accessibility. Through examination of TE narratives,

these material barriers emerged as complex challenges that intersected with both practical and cultural dimensions of access. Each barrier revealed deeper tensions between accessibility and institutional values.

Financial Barriers and Perceived Value. Financial barriers intertwined with cultural assumptions about value and commitment, creating critical challenges for teacher educators' agency. Crystal's observation about the relationship between cost and participant engagement highlighted this complex dynamic:

I've had participants be like, 'Oh, yeah... my school district made me come...I have to be here,' versus somebody who says, 'I want to be here.' Just simply charging less isn't necessarily going to solve the access issue, especially when you're wanting to create a quality experience. It's so challenging. There are people who benefit from the lower cost too.

Mary underscored the economic disparities affecting access: “\$300 to some people is nothing. \$300 to some other people is everything, as in I don't have that.” These financial realities created a paradoxical situation in which Crystal and Mary had to navigate between participants who desperately wanted to attend but could not afford it, and those who attended without investment because their costs were covered. Crystal elaborated on how this played out in grant-funded scenarios:

Not all of the people took full advantage of the opportunity when it was totally free. That financial buy-in matters ... I've observed courses with grants that reduce costs, and oftentimes the commitment isn't as high, which affects the overall quality of the experience. When someone spends \$1,000 of their own money,

they're going to show up.

These conditions created meaningful constraints on TE agency. AOSA was dedicated to expanding access for motivated educators while simultaneously building perceived value among those who might not initially recognize the worth of Orff-Schulwerk education. The organization's challenge lay in developing strategies that would both reduce financial barriers for passionate educators and cultivate meaningful engagement across all participation pathways.

Time Constraints and Program Structure. Time emerged as a critical material barrier that revealed cultural assumptions about professional development. Crystal, Mary, and Eva noted how time constraints intersected with caregiving responsibilities and professional demands. As Mary noted, “for some people the time commitment is even more difficult to give up than the financial [commitment] because they're taking care of elders, they're taking care of children especially.”

These time constraints connected to deeper questions about organizational culture and leadership in program design. The group compared various course models, noting that for some participants, two solid weeks of class would be more advantageous than one night a week throughout the school year (like Max's course), while others would prefer the opposite arrangement. Crystal observed that different course cultures emerged from commuter versus on-campus courses, highlighting how program structure affects both access and community building.

Different course structures create distinct cultural environments and learning opportunities. As Mary reflected on the traditional summer two-week model:

It's something that happens within that two weeks together that most people will not experience again—it's a unique experience where you're bonding over that time period ... but at the same time, when we talk about access—because of that time commitment, having the opportunity to have it over longer [periods of time], I know that we can get more people. [Our participants] have to take off from their summer jobs, because our teachers have summer jobs or families and that kind of thing. So, in other words, ... we should offer different opportunities, different ways to accomplish the same goal.

Eva conceptualized these various approaches as a series of trade-offs. She suggested:

I think when we're choosing a particular model to create access, we're also trading it for something. We're giving up something, and it just depends on the program ... You're committed one day a week, but the quality is going to be a different quality in that the teachers are actively teaching and using the new things they're learning. You have to go back to the question, is that higher quality when the teachers are actively able to go into their classrooms and try something versus the course at the start of June and then I don't go back to teaching until August.

The data revealed several organizational elements within AOSA's control that shaped TE agency in relation to program design. The TEs identified program format limitations as a primary constraint, noting that the predominant two-week summer model, although valuable for community building, excluded educators with specific caregiving or employment responsibilities. Resource allocation structures emerged as another key factor, with TEs expressing limited authority to redirect funds toward experimental

program formats that might better serve diverse participant needs. Access to decision-making processes about program design also surfaced as a limitation, with several TEs describing how they inherited rather than created fundamental aspects of their programs. These findings suggest that organizational flexibility in program scheduling, resource distribution, and decision-making channels represents an important domain for potential enhancement of teacher educator agency.

Geographic Access and Territorial Response. As discussed in Eva's individual interviews, geographic accessibility emerged as a substantive material barrier that revealed deeper tensions around change and territory. Focus group discussions further illuminated how these dynamics often manifested through unspoken social interactions rather than explicit policy, as Eva's story powerfully illustrated. When Eva identified a clear need for accessible AOSA Teacher Education in her state, she felt genuinely called to action. "There was a need, and that's what I saw," she explained. Her decision to establish an additional location was supported by AOSA, yet she encountered resistance from established TEs in the area.

The geographic distribution of programs raised questions about territorial attitudes within the organization. Eva approached this resistance as an opportunity for organizational growth, suggesting:

To catalyze change was to create another [course] at a different time so that there was more access, ... more opportunities for people to learn and be better at their job. And so it deviated from tradition and upset some people, but sometimes that happens in change.

Despite resistance, Eva remained committed to expanding opportunities for her local music education community. These territorial attitudes formed an invisible barrier that Eva had to navigate carefully, illustrating how geographic barriers intersected with institutional resistance to change. Her persistence in creating a new access point for teachers demonstrated both the constraints some TEs face and their potential to overcome them through resilient leadership and responsiveness to local needs. The challenge of expanding access while maintaining relationships with established programs created complex navigational demands for Eva's agency.

Cultural Barriers and Systemic Power Structures

Beyond material and geographic constraints, cultural barriers emerged as a substantive factor affecting access within AOSA Teacher Education. These barriers manifested through implicit hierarchies, traditional expectations, and approaches to leadership that sometimes inhibited inclusive participation and growth. The analysis revealed complex power dynamics operating through unofficial hierarchies and cliques within AOSA, which were not formally sanctioned by the organization.

Hierarchies and Assessment Processes. These organizational dynamics surfaced particularly during discussions about composition assignments and decision-making processes, revealing tensions around representation and authority. In a conversation about developing standardized rubrics for composition assignments, participants wrestled with questions of who held the power to create evaluation tools:

Mary: Yeah, a rubric—an AOSA rubric is necessary to help us.

Crystal: But who's going to devise that rubric?

Mary: I don't know— It would be us?

Crystal: That's the thing, because talking about the organization, there are these groups of people still within it though ... I feel like there's these cliques ... I'm a TE, but I'm not a *TE*—I'm not part of this group.

This exchange highlighted a crucial insight: Efforts to standardize assessment through rubrics could not effectively address access issues without representative participation in their development. The discussion revealed how even well-intentioned organizational initiatives could perpetuate existing power dynamics when development processes remained exclusive. This tension between good intentions and exclusionary outcomes reflected a deeper challenge that participants themselves recognized—the need for critical self-reflection about their own role in perpetuating barriers. As Eva acknowledged, “We don't have a lot of power. We don't get paid very well and society doesn't really value us ... But we still have a lot of power [in our roles] and we can make people feel really small. The participants in the room are also people. I think remembering 'people over pedagogy, people over pedagogy'—remembering that we [can also be] part of the barriers.”

Age, Experience, and Credential Hierarchies. For the TEs in this study, implicit social hierarchies continued to shape interactions and opportunities in ways that impeded innovation and inclusion. These hierarchies showed up through the questioning of credentials, differential access to resources and support, and subtle patterns of exclusion that particularly impacted TEs from underrepresented groups. Eva's experience launching a new course illustrated this tension when she found herself “navigating those

dynamics, not wanting to upset my elders and teachers, but also seeing this gap in access.” Crystal also noted the impact of age-based hierarchies that affected her confidence as a younger TE working with experienced educators. She acknowledged, “It may be mostly my own self-doubt and imposter syndrome, but it's really hard when I'm younger than a lot of the people I'm teaching ... Because, like, who am I to tell them how to be a better teacher?” This dynamic revealed how implicit hierarchies created psychological barriers that limited TE agency even when formal policies were developed to promote equity and inclusion.

Mary shared several stories during her interviews and the focus group that revealed how implicit social hierarchies can persist even as institutions implement explicit equity policies. The isolation she experienced in developing teaching materials—being told by others whom she perceived as authority figures that she must generate all her own materials independently—contrasted sharply with the collaborative support she later learned many other TEs received. This discrepancy highlighted how uneven access to resources and collegial support could substantially constrain the effectiveness and confidence of TEs from underrepresented groups.

In a moment of profound vulnerability, Mary shared the deeply personal impact of having colleagues question her professional standing, recounting how they observed her teaching while exchanging whispered critiques from the back of the room. Her candid reflection revealed the stark disparities in how credentials were valued within the organization's informal hierarchy. This experience of scrutiny and implicit questioning of

competence created considerable barriers to her sense of belonging and professional agency within the community.

Mary's detailed account illuminated the painful reality of credential gatekeeping she encountered with faculty colleagues at a new course:

When I shared where I received my training—even being a National Board Certified Teacher, Teacher of the Year, etc.—I realized my credentials were not impressive enough for them—they were not good enough from the very first meeting that we had. And whatever else, the rumor mill in AOSA is deep and wide. It was really a challenge. I could not convince them that I—well, they felt like they had to do Level I for me, even though neither of them had ever taught Basic. They felt like they were more qualified and should do it for me, just to make sure that the standards of AOSA were upheld. And that was the biggest insult to me because I also have high standards. I'm not below standard in thinking or desire. Do I consider myself *the* best Orff teacher? Absolutely not. But I'm not subpar or substandard. It was just totally insulting.

Mary's experience with credential gatekeeping revealed a deeper pattern of exclusionary practices that became even more pronounced when intersecting with racial identity. Her narrative exposed how informal hierarchies can override formal qualifications, creating additional hurdles for those already experiencing marginalization within primarily white institutional spaces. As she continued to share her experiences, the conversation turned toward more explicit discussions of how race shapes access and opportunity within AOSA.

Race and Systemic Barriers and DEIA Implementation Challenges. Although AOSA actively worked to implement diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) principles, the TEs in this study identified persistent challenges ranging from procedural issues to deeper structural barriers. Max's experience with DEIA modules highlighted how implementation choices could inadvertently create new barriers:

I love the intent behind it ... But then it just becomes another, it's like gatekeeping for some... It's a struggle for me just to keep focused on that and then to realize that someone's giving me a grade. Am I going to lose if I don't pass? Can I take it again? Okay, that's great. But I think there's some barriers there that ... hold other people back too.

This implementation challenge revealed the tension between organizational intentions and lived experiences.

As the only African American TE in the study, Mary's experiences exposed the ongoing challenges she faced as a Black woman within AOSA, even amid organizational efforts toward inclusion. Her observation that “the line keeps changing. The more some of us get in, the line just keep changing...” sparked deeper discussion about systemic racism. When reflecting on her professional journey, Mary explicitly named race as a critical factor:

I think I mentioned the part that felt most challenging—I believe race has been an issue. I cannot say that it was for certain, but I do believe it's been an issue, and that has been a very challenging part of the whole journey.

When prompted to elaborate on her comment that “it's my life story,” Mary shared a broader perspective on the discrimination she had encountered throughout her career:

As a Black woman, no matter what I achieved, it's still not enough. Well, what school did you go to? ... Who's your teacher? It's just like, oh, well they're not [strong], but I know they are. But that's the concept of elitism. For some reason, humans devised this thing ... Somebody's got to be under me ... That's a human nature thing.

Mary's analysis revealed how her individual experiences reflected systemic inequities that extended far beyond AOSA.

The impact of racial bias became starkly evident in Max's account of witnessing explicit racism at Mary's session at the AOSA National Conference. Max shared that he was settling in near the back of the room as her presentation started, when he overheard “someone that [he] respected” say “I don't teach Black kids. This isn't for me,” before walking out of the session. As Max told this story—an act that illuminated the trust that had developed over the course of the day—the room fell silent, with Mary's knowing gaze showing deep recognition, yet the conversation continued constructively.

This incident became a transformative moment for Max's teaching practice and understanding of his own agency. Inspired by Mary's approach, he integrated stepping into his own teaching with renewed conviction and cultural awareness. He reflected on his own experiences teaching children in [an urban neighborhood]:

I worked at a school—they had a huge stepping program in [an urban neighborhood]. They were the citywide champions. They were amazing. And [the students] were the best musicians I probably ever taught... Actually, because of you [gesturing toward Mary]—you changed two girls' lives, I'm going to tell you that right now ... They joined stepping teams. They're from a very, very poor family and they [felt inspired to join] stepping teams. The community that they got from that is—I'm going to say probably saved their lives.

Max's willingness to name the explicit racism he had witnessed, while recognizing his own positionality as a “white guy” in the space and crediting Mary's shared expertise as instrumental in helping him connect meaningfully with his students, illustrated how encountering these racist cultural barriers had catalyzed his agency. This translation of insight into action demonstrated how individual agency can challenge systemic barriers even as those barriers persist.

These overlapping barriers—from credential questioning to racial discrimination to challenges in translating DEIA principles into practice—created ongoing tensions between what AOSA said it wanted to achieve and what TEs actually experienced. Although the organization's official policies aimed to support TEs and welcome diverse voices, unspoken rules and hidden biases continued to determine who had real access and influence. The experiences shared by study participants suggested that supporting TE agency meant changing not just written policies but also the unwritten cultural expectations that shaped how those policies were experienced.

The Power of Dialogue in Professional Learning Communities

The focus group experience itself emerged as a powerful example of how structured professional dialogue can activate TE agency. As TEs participated in this collaborative space, they interrogated systemic concerns and challenged long-standing assumptions while forging a network of mutual support. This research process demonstrated how intentional dialogue spaces enabled these TEs to transform individual concerns into shared understandings, fostering individual and collective agency.

One month after our discussions, participants' reflections revealed the transformative impact of this collaborative experience on their professional identity and practice, illustrating the potential of intentional collaboration among AOSA TEs. Max captured how the dialogue space addressed previously unrecognized professional isolation:

This experience gave me a connection to other TEs in the trenches that I didn't know I was thirsting for. The intimacy and openness fostered by everyone allowed me to be vulnerable [as I shared] my experiences/personal doubts, validated my work as a TE, and pushed me to think of my role in the broader Orff community.

He contrasted this dialogue-focused approach with traditional professional development opportunities, noting that “AOSA should provide opportunities like ours regularly. CTED [Continuing Teacher Educator Development session] during a busy conference, while helpful, is not as impactful, even though well intentioned.”

Similarly, Eva highlighted how participating in the focus group dialogue helped her counter feelings of isolation that some TEs experience:

I felt a connection to you and the others just being together in that room and being able to not feel alone in the work that we do. I guess as we get contracted out to various states and places, we feel like a general music teacher often does—feeling alone in our school, being the only one doing the work.

Eva added that the focus group structure facilitated a unique dynamic, observing “when we're at conference or in CTED, there's a lot of ego and a lot of opinions and thoughts and hierarchy that we often are navigating in those spaces.”

Crystal's reflection revealed how the dialogue prompted deeper professional self-examination: “I think one of the biggest moments of insight was recognizing that while I ask my participants to be reflective of their teaching practices, I have not been as reflective of my own practices as a TE!” She particularly valued the structured approach that supported vulnerable sharing: “Diana, the way you framed your questions with us—rating ourselves on a scale—was a very easy way of helping us feel comfortable exploring the questions you had us explore more deeply later.”

The sustained impact of this collaborative dialogue became evident through the ongoing group chat via text messaging among participants in the weeks following our discussions. The TEs continued to share resources, seek advice about teaching materials, and maintain the supportive relationships developed during the focus group. Eva's metaphor of “transplanting” community, that she spoke about relative to a faculty member moving on to a different course, captured this sustained impact:

You have the memory of the community, and you take it with you wherever you go. You're taking it with you into the future, and you're creating it in these new spaces. You're changing the space with what we brought or what we gathered.

My researcher journal notes illuminated how the dialogue space evolved over the course of our discussions, with initial professional caution giving way to increasingly vulnerable sharing as trust developed. By the final hour of the focus group, participants were brainstorming strategies to collectively challenge some of the barriers they had named, supporting each other's agency in the process. The conversation shifted from describing challenges to actively developing collaborative approaches to transformation through connection, vulnerable sharing, and collaborative problem-solving.

Reconceptualizing Quality and Access

A pivotal breakthrough in the focus group discussions emerged through the critical reexamination of what constitutes “quality” in AOSA Teacher Education. Eva challenged the conventional wisdom that positions quality and access as competing values, arguing instead for their fundamental interconnection. She articulated this insight during a discussion about institutional priorities:

We addressed the question with quality and access being kind of synonymous... because one of the main tenets of Orff Schulwerk is group collaboration and that provides access to everyone involved and maintains quality because we're being able to make music together and play together and then access the skill sets and the gifts of each individual.

This reframing suggested that addressing barriers to access might not only create more equitable participation but could actually enhance the quality of AOSA Teacher Education by bringing diverse perspectives and talents into the community of practice.

The group explored this reconceptualization through practical questions about teaching materials and pedagogical approaches. When discussing what constitutes “quality materials,” the TEs engaged in rich dialogue about subjective judgment versus objective criteria. Eva emphasized the importance of acknowledging subjectivity in material selection, noting that children's unfiltered responses often reveal quality through embodied engagement and emotional resonance.

However, while acknowledging the subjective nature of quality, the TEs also established clear ethical boundaries for material exclusion that demonstrated their commitment to culturally responsive practice. Crystal articulated an unequivocal stance on cultural sensitivity: “I will say it's not quality if it demeans a group of people... If it's demeaning toward a group of people, all those conversations about which songs to remove, I mean it's not going to be quality if there's a racist history to it.”

The group's exploration of quality connected back to Orff's original vision for the approach. Eva shared how even Orff himself was initially reluctant to codify his approach in text form: “When he was developing Orff Schulwerk, he was told that if you're creating a pedagogy, you need to write something ... And he was like, why do I?” This historical insight reinforced the TEs' understanding that source materials were designed to be models rather than prescriptions, challenging assumptions that may have historically limited TE agency and legitimizing their role as pedagogical innovators.

Strategic Organizational Navigation

The TEs shared the belief that that effective change sometimes requires working within institutional structures while gradually reshaping them. Eva captured this strategic perspective in her reflection on organizational change:

I feel like the tension is in the questioning of tradition and old patterns that exclude and create unnecessary barriers... You have to work within the system. You have to infiltrate it to know how to make the small changes.

Eva's personal journey with challenging “tradition and old patterns” in the AOSA community further illuminated her approach. Drawing from her Filipino-American background, she articulated how traditional authority structures can impede innovation and inclusion:

I'm not for that hierarchy anymore. Though I participate in it in my role in some ways, I try to undo certain thought patterns. When I hear students advocate for themselves, I question, are they being disrespectful or is this sometimes something I need to pay attention to?

This questioning mindset shaped Eva's big-picture thinking about organizational history and tradition within AOSA:

So, I think that we need to acknowledge the history and the things that started it, and then also remember we are on this continuum. We're a part of this lineage and we will evolve. We can take some things with us and be who we are and then see what the future holds too with what we teach to our children and our students.

As their dialogue continued, the TEs brainstormed strategies for transforming

practice while working within the existing AOSA Teacher Education structure. Max advocated for “multi-genre artistry-integration, collaboration, crossover, elemental music as an access point to re-create and remix,” emphasizing the importance of connecting to students' funds of knowledge. Crystal added that Max’s ideas might help secondary music educators in particular to “think beyond the traditional ensembles.” Eva emphasized the importance of being “purposeful about including [the students’ preferred] music as a springboard for more music making.”

Additionally, accessing the TE role itself emerged as an important topic. The TEs acknowledged that the selection process has evolved considerably from the old informal system where candidates were “tapped on the shoulder” to a more structured application process. However, they also reported perceived challenges in cultivating truly equitable pathways to leadership. As the TEs discussed this evolution, they recognized AOSA's efforts to address deeper issues of access and equity by striving to make the application processes more transparent yet also named the timeline and application complexity as specific barriers.

Crystal's and Eva's experiences illustrated how TEs navigate pathways to the TE role through persistence and strategic adaptation. Both were turned down on their first attempt but ended up pursuing alternative routes and secured new opportunities that eventually led to teacher educator (Level I Basic) positions within the organization. Crystal first became a movement and recorder TE, which served as solid stepping stones into the role of Level I TE. Eva's journey included encouragement from colleagues who recognized the need for more diverse perspectives: “One of my Orff colleagues

encouraged me to apply for apprenticeship again, saying 'Do you not see how we need you?'" Crystal and Eva's experiences revealed that access to the TE role can develop through various pathways and experiences. They shared their stories openly with one another, acknowledging the initial disappointment and shared resolve to persevere, while culminating in a conversation about the importance of creating multiple routes to leadership to expand representation within AOSA's teaching community.

Challenging Power Structures and Gatekeeping

During their dialogue, the TEs questioned traditional assessment practices, revealing another tension—the tension between standardization and cultural responsiveness. The challenge of creating objective evaluation criteria that account for intangible qualities surfaced particularly in discussions about rubrics for the TE role. Max described encountering this tension:

So, I was speaking with some people who led one of the committees—we were just chit-chatting—and they said, “They got this score in the rubric, and this [other] one got this score, because they just had something extra. They had something special... But in a way, I do understand it. I think we all probably understand that little *je ne sais quoi*, but I think that's hard. I think it's hard also to quantify it.

The dialogue continued into broader issues of cultural responsiveness and implicit bias in evaluation processes, and Crystal drew on her diverse teaching experiences, from the South to the Midwest to the East Coast, to suggest that assessment criteria that may appear neutral at first glance may actually reflect particular cultural values and

expectations.

Next, the TEs raised questions about who holds the authority to evaluate and the composition of decision-making bodies within AOSA. They questioned the demographic makeup of evaluation committees: “What are their backgrounds? What are their ethnicities?... there can be unintentional prejudice in that.” Such examination of who holds evaluative power speaks to broader issues of professional authority and knowledge ownership within the organization.

The complexities of attribution and ownership in AOSA Teacher Education emerged through discussions of a contemporary controversy within the community. When a well-known TE and curriculum series editor expressed frustration on social media about less experienced presenters using his materials without attribution, the incident sparked deeper questions about originality and ownership within Orff Schulwerk teaching. These questions revealed underlying tensions that affect how TEs perceive knowledge sharing.

Eva challenged conventional notions of authorship by questioning the source of published materials, particularly the role of student contributions. She observed the irony in how educators approach authorship when creating teaching resources. She observed:

When you mentioned being beneficial to the children and accessible and then a TE or a published Orff educator will write material and then present about it and share it and want to be credited—it’s fascinating to me how oftentimes those people are also using the material of their children, their students. Their children are the springboard—the children's ideas were springboards from whatever the

seed or this source or book.

This critique highlighted how attribution practices often overlook the collaborative nature of knowledge creation in music education, potentially reinforcing hierarchical power structures.

Questions of monetization and equity further complicated these discussions about ownership and attribution in ways that revealed economic dimensions of gatekeeping. When discussing the ethics of using children's cultural materials in commercial materials, Eva pointed out the economic implications: "Even if you did get permission from the children, you're selling the book, you are making the money, you're profiting off of that. Not the children, not the families—you are." The TEs also questioned the requirement of specific texts, with one expressing frustration about mandatory materials that weren't fully utilized: "I barely [expletive] use this thing and [the students] have to buy it... somebody's making money off of that." These concerns revealed how economic structures intersect with professional authority in shaping educational practice.

The discussion ultimately revealed how attribution practices serve to maintain professional hierarchies within AOSA Teacher Education through social capital rather than purely financial mechanisms. Eva's observation—"It's not the money; you don't make a lot of money whether somebody buys your book. It's popularity; it's social capital."—highlighted how attribution functions as a form of professional currency within the organization. These critiques of professional authority and ownership ultimately pointed the TEs back to the central mission of serving students, suggesting the need to realign AOSA community practice with student needs rather than professional

status.

The TEs questioned fundamental assumptions about who AOSA serves and what constitutes the core purpose of Orff Schulwerk education. Although Mary suggested the TE role may require holding participants to some standard—"we're creating music educators, which means they have the responsibility of teaching children as much about music as possible"—Crystal kindly pushed back, questioning "is an Orff Schulwerk teacher purely a music educator or are they dance educators?," noting the varied professionals who seek training, including "Montessori students . . . general classroom teachers . . . maybe they want to bring it into their social studies class." This questioning of purpose directly connected to questions of access and representation, opening possibilities for reaching diverse professional communities.

Max's experience working with international students led him to question Eurocentric assumptions about what constitutes musical competence and understanding. He described working with a Turkish student who "read a different notation system... And she worked really hard, and I didn't worry about her notation... she got the other creative elements of it. She could do everything, just in her own system." This story challenged the group to reconsider what they may have considered "neutral" skill requirements, particularly those involving Western notation, recognizing how these requirements function as barriers to participation for educators with different cultural and musical backgrounds.

The conversation then evolved to examine gatekeeping practices more directly, with Eva interrogating the psychological motivations that drive exclusionary behaviors:

Yeah, you're hoarding... Human nature, motivation, implicit bias and insecurity... It usually reveals that there's something about that person or the organization that they're dealing with—their own insecurity, or they're trying to protect the integrity, or I need to be perceived as still relevant.

This insight revealed how institutional standards, though often well-intentioned, can shift into gatekeeping mechanisms that exclude capable educators, particularly through curricular requirements like notation that privilege certain cultural backgrounds over others.

The TEs discussed expanding access to AOSA Teacher Education by developing multiple pathways and diverse program formats to reach different populations. Crystal observed how varied approaches might yield more participation: “Honestly, I feel like some of the courses I've taught in have been more diverse than the people I'm seeing at national conference... It sometimes draws different people in, and I wonder, can the course help draw the people to the bigger organization as a whole?” These observations prompted deeper questioning about how program design affects who participates in AOSA education.

The Orff Institute in Salzburg emerged as a surprising model of inclusive practice that challenged American adaptations of the approach. Mary articulated this contrast:

As I talk to people who have been to the institute and hear their experiences, I wonder if that approach needs to be our focus as opposed to what we've created—because of what America has created it to be. We have a lot more gatekeeping underneath it as opposed to the original design.

Mary's observation suggested that expanding access might require not only moving forward but also reconnecting with original pedagogical values that emphasized creative exploration over technical requirements.

Having visited Salzburg in recent years, Max described how the Institute welcomed professionals outside traditional music education:

They find ways that [the learning] relates to whatever their job is. We had two Italian speech language pathologists taking it—they wanted to understand how music relates to what they're doing, and also so they could integrate it into their subject.

This inclusivity extended to pedagogical approaches, with less emphasis placed on notation-based literacy and more focus on movement and creative exploration, demonstrating how returning to foundational principles might support more inclusive practices.

This inclusive model from Salzburg aligned with the TEs' understanding of Orff Schulwerk's collaborative foundations. Eva reminded the group, "the way that Orff Schulwerk stands out is the collaboration and that is an assets-based approach." Crystal reinforced this perspective, suggesting "[Orff Schulwerk] is not about the most excellent musicians. It's about everybody bringing something to the group." These principles guided the TE's vision for more inclusive organizational practices.

Closing

In Chapter 5, I showed how the focus group dialogue both revealed deeper insights into TE agency and activated it in practice. In Chapter 6, I will synthesize

findings from both phases of the study to address the research questions directly. Then, in Chapter 7, I will explore implications for practice and future direction.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

The teacher educators (TEs) in this study of American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA) Teacher Education employed their agency to put cultural responsiveness into practice rather than serving as arbiters of tradition or instigators of change. This finding shifted my understanding of how TEs navigate their roles within AOSA's educational ecosystem and revealed their underlying motivations to create more inclusive and resonant learning experiences for teacher-participants. To guide the articulation of this discovery, this discussion chapter utilizes both Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of teacher agency with Gay's (2018) framework of culturally responsive teaching and Wenger's (1999) communities of practice.

Priestley et al.'s (2015) model provides a temporal lens for examining how TEs achieved agency through three dimensions: iterative (drawing from past experiences), practical-evaluative (responding to present circumstances), and projective (working toward future possibilities). Additionally, Gay's (2018) framework offers six qualities of culturally responsive teaching that clarify how TEs enacted this agency: validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. Wenger's (1999) communities of practice framework further enriches this understanding by revealing how these agentic, culturally responsive practices emerged through collaborative participation in professional learning communities where shared repertoires, joint enterprise, and mutual engagement created the conditions for collective agency development. The innovative contribution of this study lies in drawing connections between these frameworks to reveal how TEs' temporal agency achievements showed up

as culturally responsive teaching practices, answering the question: *agency for what?* To illuminate these interconnections, consider a metaphor that resonates with the philosophical underpinnings of Orff Schulwerk.

The relationship between teacher agency and culturally responsive teaching resembles that of a skilled community chef who approaches cooking as both an improvisatory art form and a responsive community practice. The chef draws upon their accumulated knowledge, cultural insights, and technical abilities while responding creatively to the ingredients, tools, and community needs present in their kitchen. Iterative agency emerges as the chef draws from a rich repertoire of experiences and cultural knowledge. They recall which dishes resonated before, which ingredient combinations sparked joy, and which cooking methods honored their guests' backgrounds. Practical-evaluative agency appears as the chef responds to the unique composition of ingredients and diners present in the moment. They read the room, adapt to available resources, and invite everyone to bring their own flavors and techniques to the communal pot, making the kitchen a place where community voices shape the meal together. This communal kitchen functions as a community of practice, where shared repertoires of cooking techniques, cultural knowledge, and improvisational strategies develop through legitimate peripheral participation, as novice cooks learn along experienced chefs in authentic contexts. Projective agency shows up when chefs envision kitchens as spaces where new food traditions emerge through collective improvisation, challenging conventional culinary boundaries.

Cultural responsiveness shows up through these dimensions when the community

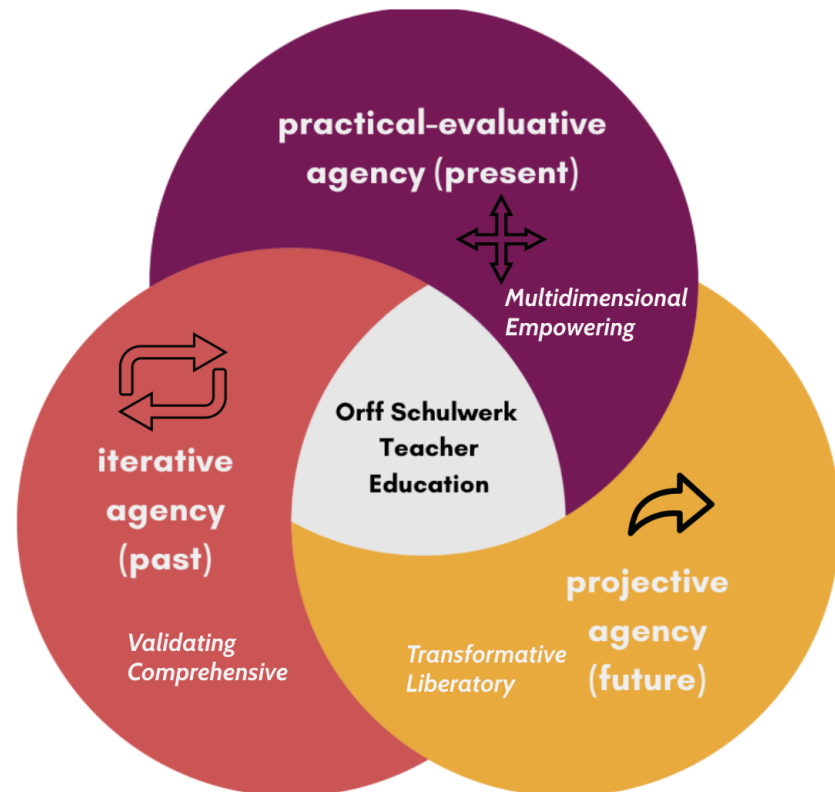
chef creates dishes that recognize culinary heritages, designs complete meals that nourish body, mind, and spirit, and engages all senses by balancing textures, flavors, and presentations. They foster diners' identities as “foodies” by setting and sustaining high standards. They flip traditional kitchen roles, inviting diners to participate in the cooking and share their own food knowledge, making meal preparation a community experience where everyone's ideas shape not just tonight's dinner but how the kitchen works in the future. These collaborative cooking experiences create communities of practice where culinary knowledge is co-constructed through joint enterprise, with participants developing shared ways of talking about food, common understandings of what constitutes good cooking, and collective ownership of the kitchen's evolving practices. The dining space becomes a place where trying new things is not just allowed but encouraged—a place where people do not just eat what is served but develop their own flavor preferences and cooking instincts through guided culinary exploration.

As shown through this culinary metaphor, the integration of teacher agency and culturally responsive teaching becomes particularly valuable for understanding TE agency because it reveals how conditions shape actions. Although cultural responsiveness appears across all three dimensions of agency, certain qualities tend to cluster in particular temporal dimensions. Validating and comprehensive practices appeared most prominently within iterative agency as TEs tapped into their own personal and professional and learning experiences to support teacher-participants. Multidimensional and empowering qualities emerged much of the time as practical-evaluative agency as they created responsive, present-moment learning environments. Transformative and

emancipatory practices aligned most visibly with projective agency as TEs envisioned more equitable educational futures. Notably, these projective practices emerged mainly through communities of practice, where TEs collaborated across institutional boundaries, creating networks of shared learning that challenged traditional professional development models and fostered collective agency toward educational transformation. These patterns, while not rigid, provide a framework for examining how agency and cultural responsiveness intertwine in teacher education.

Figure 2

Temporal Domains of Teacher Agency (Priestley et al., 2015) aligned with Gay's Six Qualities of Culturally Responsive Teaching (2018)



In the following section, I explore iterative agency more deeply, examining how TEs translated their formative personal experiences into culturally responsive practices that validated and comprehensively addressed the needs of their teacher-participants. Having established this conceptual framework, I now explore each temporal dimension, beginning with how TEs' past experiences shaped their present practice.

Iterative Agency (Past Dimension)

The iterative dimension of teacher agency focuses on how past experiences inform present practice. This reflective orientation provides a natural connection to the *validating* and *comprehensive* qualities of culturally responsive teaching. When the TEs in this study drew upon their personal and professional histories, they gained unique resources for centering and affirming the teacher-participants in the room. Additionally, shaped by practical necessity more than sentimental attachment, the TEs learned to leverage Orff Schulwerk principles and practices to help course participants access “a wide range of cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions, and perspectives” (Gay, 2018, p. 39). This analysis illuminates how the TEs achieved iterative agency as they utilized Orff Schulwerk as a launching point for culturally responsive music teaching.

Translating Formative Personal Experiences into Current Practice

The TEs in this study drew from their accumulated personal and professional experiences to create validating learning environments that affirmed and centered the backgrounds of their teacher-participants. For example, Crystal's story, as outlined in her participant profile, illustrated how a pivotal childhood experiences can shape TE priorities. After experiencing a disorienting elementary music audition where she was

expected to match pitch without preparation or explanation, Crystal now ensures all students have equitable access to musical knowledge, specifically around terms or concepts may be new to some teacher-participants. She demonstrated a commitment to making implicit cultural knowledge explicit through clear teaching and re-teaching of elemental principles, building in intermediate steps to make sure all learners could access the content. This validating and comprehensive approach recognizes that what might be familiar in one cultural context remains unfamiliar in another. By systematically unpacking assumed knowledge, Crystal created inclusive learning pathways that connect curriculum content to the lived experiences of her students, ensuring that cultural knowledge gaps don't become barriers to musical participation and growth.

Crystal's story extends Powell's (2019) discussion of how “pre-constructed philosophies” influence teacher agency (p. 207). Although Powell noted that novice teachers are influenced by their educational experiences, potentially leading to “replication of practice rather than growth, development, and change” (p. 207), Crystal's case demonstrated how early experiences can sometimes motivate teachers to deliberately transform rather than reproduce practices they encountered. Beyond childhood experiences, mentor relationships and teaching contexts emerged as powerful shapers of TEs' teaching philosophies.

All of the TEs in this study described a clear developmental progression from initially imitating their mentors to developing their own authentic approaches. Max's journey exemplified this evolution, from his immediate connection as a learner—“From the minute I sat down in [the Level I Basic] class...it was like I was home right away”—

to his transition into teaching. Max's mentor and predecessor had studied directly with Orff and Keetman, creating a direct lineage that provided him with a meaningful opportunity for iterative agency development. In contrast, Mary mentioned she felt under supported as a new TE until she found reciprocal peer mentorship (West et al., 2022) with a fellow TE who she also considered a trusted friend. In her role as a course founder, when Eva encountered quiet resistance to her course development goals from TEs she considered mentors and elders, her experience revealed how limitations can sometimes paradoxically strengthen agency. This example will be analyzed in greater depth later in this chapter. Although mentor relationships shaped these TEs' iterative agency, their varied teaching experiences with children across settings provided crucial practical insights that further informed their approaches.

The findings both reinforce and expand on Taranto's (2010) work on pedagogical lineage in Orff Schulwerk teacher education. Where Taranto mapped formal pedagogical family trees and the emergence of distinct pedagogical camps, this study further illuminates the more complex reality of how TEs navigate their professional identities. The participants in this research demonstrated thoughtful, multi-layered approaches to honoring their pedagogical heritages while simultaneously cultivating their own distinctive voices and teaching philosophies. Rather than simply positioning themselves within established lineages, they reinterpreted traditions through their personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and evolving educational values, creating a dynamic dialogue between inheritance and innovation.

Crystal's progression through dramatically different teaching environments

exemplified how past professional experiences can shape a teacher's interpretive lens. Moving from a city in the South, where she was “one of five white faces in the whole building,” to the Midwest, where most of her students shared her cultural background, led to enduring insights about culturally responsive teaching.

These experiences complement Spruce et al.'s (2021) emphasis on how professional experiences become part of teachers' “values and beliefs about music education” (p. 70), informing future practice and expanding a teacher's sense of possibility and capacity for action. As the TEs developed their own voices within the Orff Schulwerk tradition, they drew on insights gained from varied teaching contexts to create increasingly responsive and authentic approaches.

Cultivating Trusting Relationships with Teacher-Participants by Connecting to their Stories

Eva's use of pre-course surveys and responsive course adjustments exemplified validating and comprehensive teaching. By gathering information about participants' backgrounds, needs, and goals before her courses began, she established a foundation for teaching that acknowledges and affirms each learner's unique identity. This proactive approach enabled her to recognize and incorporate students' cultural knowledge and experiences into her teaching.

By emphasizing group collaboration as “one of the main tenets of Orff Schulwerk” that “provides access to everyone,” Eva created a learning environment where multiple perspectives are not only welcomed but essential to the educational process. This collaborative approach served as a powerful mechanism for validating

participants' varied backgrounds, experiences, and approaches to music education.

Similarly, Max fostered relationships with both the children he taught and his adult teacher-participants by personalizing and contextualizing traditional Orff Schulwerk materials, like nursery rhymes. Max's development of “Uncle Pigeon” as an urban alternative to Mother Goose further exemplified this commitment to relationship building by anchoring to their shared context. Rather than simply teaching traditional nursery rhymes requiring extensive context explanation—“we have to teach a whole thing on what porridge is”—Max created a culturally responsive alternative connecting to students' lived experiences in urban environments. Max was not simply changing content, but rather addressing cultural relevance, student engagement, pedagogical appropriateness, and contextual applicability. This adaptation required him to consider what might resonate with the learners and what references make sense to them.

These findings support and build upon Brandon's (2013) investigation of AOSA's historical development, particularly regarding her emphasis on providing teachers with a “philosophical core that can support changing times and locations” (p. 187). The TEs in this study demonstrated a philosophically grounded adaptiveness, extending Brandon's historical analysis into contemporary practice. However, contrary to Brandon's (2013) recommendation that teachers should adapt Orff Schulwerk to remain relevant amidst changing technological and cultural landscapes for the sake of preservation, the TEs in this study articulated a fundamentally different vision. Rather than viewing relevance as something that must be deliberately engineered, these educators positioned the core principles of Orff Schulwerk as inherently enduring, suggesting that its philosophical

foundation transcends temporal boundaries across changing contexts.

In this study, validating teaching involved taking time to learn about each teacher-participant and building on their musical, professional, dispositional strengths in an assets-based approach. Eva explained that she views quality and access as interconnected concepts. She argued that the Orff Schulwerk approach provides inclusive participation opportunities while preserving educational quality through collective music-making that draws upon each participant's unique contributions. This perspective illuminated Eva's philosophical commitment to validation and her trust in the inherent capacity of each individual to contribute meaningfully to shared learning and artistry, where human potential is both recognized and realized through collaborative engagement.

Validating teaching also emerged in how the TEs customized assignments to align with participants' cultural norms and linguistic backgrounds. For example, they raised critical questions, such as "Prosody for whom? Because then you get to the issue of different cultures speaking with different types of emphasis." Max described a validating approach to prosody exercises by encouraging international students to work in their preferred languages, explaining that this approach allows students to build understanding from their natural speech patterns before exploring notation together. This culturally responsive adaptation exemplified how validation honors participants' linguistic assets while creating pathways for shared musical learning.

Anchoring to Pragmatic and Comprehensive Orff Schulwerk Principles and Practices

Throughout the study, the TEs characterized Orff Schulwerk not simply as a set of techniques, but rather as a pragmatic approach that provided solutions to teaching

challenges (Brown & Broeker, 2023). The TEs' experience of its effectiveness in practice, particularly its learner-centered flexibility, motivated them to preserve and continue the approach. Their accumulated positive experiences implementing Orff's principles across different contexts further cemented their commitment. This created a self-reinforcing cycle where past successes fueled their ongoing dedication to preserving and expanding this effective pedagogical tradition.

Both Eva and Crystal exemplified this pragmatic worldview where “the practicality of everyday human action is central to understanding” (Brown & Broeker, 2023, p. 11). Eva found Orff Schulwerk to be “the way to do [music teaching] better,” while Crystal was delighted to discover a creativity-focused music teaching approach that provided both a pedagogical home and professional community early in her career. Their commitment stemmed primarily from personally experiencing the method's effectiveness in addressing real challenges through authentic tasks and collaborative learning, rather than from environmental pressures or mentor influence.

This pattern offers an important contrast to Powell's (2019) research on how teachers reproduce educational structures. Although Powell found that teachers often maintained practices due to external pressures or what Freire termed “adhesion” to established systems, these TEs chose to sustain Orff approaches through what Brown and Broeker (2023) described as remaining “ever aware of the present needs of learners, fueled by the hope and excitement that arises from the continual evolution of our practice” (p. 15). This distinction highlights how teacher agency used toward preserving specific educational approaches can potentially be driven by a teacher's perception of its

usefulness rather than external pressures.

Eva's cross-cultural perspective further enriched her understanding of the approach's adaptability. She reflected, "I learned Orff Schulwerk in one tradition, and then I learned that there are multiple traditions in Orff Schulwerk." This awareness of diverse implementations within the same pedagogical framework enhanced her ability to select and adapt techniques based on student needs rather than feel obligated to rigidly adhere to a single interpretation.

These TE expressions of iterative agency demonstrated how past experiences can serve dual purposes. As Tucker (2020) suggested, "critical reflection is a necessary skill for music teachers' consideration of their iterative agency in the reproduction of, adaptation to, or replacement of existing models of school music education" (p. 27). Their histories simultaneously grounded them in proven practices they deemed worthy of preserving while also motivating them to create positive changes to address gaps they had experienced firsthand. Although the TEs valued the foundational principles of Orff Schulwerk, they did not view them as prescriptive but rather as launching points for creative teaching.

Using the Orff Schulwerk Approach as Springboard

To the TEs in this study, Orff Schulwerk transcended traditional method; instead, it served as a vehicle for learner-centered, improvisation-driven experiences. The approach functioned not as a destination, but as an entry point—a portal to integrated music and movement, the broader arts, and ultimately, our shared humanity. Eva articulated this perspective when referring to the Orff Schulwerk source materials,

reminding focus group members, “They’re not meant to be replicated or duplicated—they’re just springboards for ideas.” Max emphasized this perspective by characterizing foundational texts as resources rather than sacred documents: “The yellow book [a *Music for Children* volume]—it’s not a religious text that we must go by wholeheartedly, but a lot of answers are in there. They’re all just models.” Even Mary, who revealed that sometimes she feels more inclined to be a “purist,” agreed with the group—the source materials were designed to be maps for exploration, not predetermined destinations. This distinction reflected a more organic relationship between tradition and innovation, where responsiveness to contemporary needs flowed naturally from, rather than despite, their understanding of Orff’s foundational approaches.

Just as these TEs used Orff Schulwerk source materials as springboards, their iterative agency allowed them to launch from foundational experiences and principles into responsive practice. However, effective teaching also requires real-time adaptation to immediate circumstances in the classroom, which will be explored through the lens of practical-evaluative agency.

Practical-Evaluative Agency (Present Dimension)

The practical-evaluative dimension of teacher agency emerges through the immediate decisions educators make within their instructional contexts. When these TEs encountered potentially constraining conditions, they made responsive, in-the-moment decisions that acknowledged and adapted to the learning styles present among teacher-participants. Moving past traditional teacher roles, the TEs embraced their roles multidimensionally and empowered teacher-participants by fostering spaces where

learners could exercise voice and choice, deliberately shifting decision-making authority from teacher to learner within their shared context. This analysis reveals how these TEs achieved practical-evaluative agency as they adapted Orff-inspired pedagogy to respond to their learners' academic, social, emotional, and psychological needs (Gay, 2018).

Serving as Community-Building Conduits and Culture Facilitators

The TEs' practical-evaluative agency was evident in the ways that they served as community-building conduits and culture facilitators as they adapted to different facility configurations, schedules, and resource availability. For example, Crystal modified her approach based on whether students were residential or commuting, noting how the "camp-like setting" at one location enabled extended collaborative work time while commuter programs required different pacing and homework structures. Recognizing that the teacher-participants who stayed on campus during a course tended to use their evening time to practice and work on assignments alongside each other, Crystal realized that she would have to dedicate time and space within the class day at her commuter courses to cultivate a similar community culture. In contrast to Crystal's residential versus commuter challenge, Max faced a different structural obstacle with his year-round program format that initially appeared to present barriers to community building.

Max's year-round program structure provided another distinct set of constraints to consider. At first, the focus group assumed that the extended time frame might inhibit community building relative to the traditional summer intensive formats—that teacher-participants in the year-round course would not develop bonds as tightly as those in summer courses. However, Max embraced his role as a community-building conduit and

culture facilitator, as he suggested:

I think that [building a sense of community] is part of our job as teacher educators too. I think people that have gotten really close in a couple weeks in our course because it's over time and they come twenty minutes or half an hour early. I post a question and bring out snacks, and then they will take out an instrument and they'll try their [arrangements]—and I try to build that. I noticed that people were just coming from six to nine and leaving, but now I've tried to build other ways so they stay connected.

Additionally, Max took advantage of a year-long schedule by providing opportunities for teachers to try out lesson ideas during the weeks between classes. He invited participants to record lessons with their students and submit teaching videos of them working with their students for feedback. Though not a requirement or even a suggestion in the AOSA Teacher Education curriculum, Max leveraged his unique schedule to benefit the teachers in his program. On a logistical level, this resonates with Powell's (2019) observation that “paradoxically, structuration offers the possibility that the structure that acts as a confining force to teacher agency could provide the very means to create change” (p. 213). Agentic TEs often view potential barriers as opportunities. In this case, Max exemplified this by capitalizing on his situation to provide unique benefits to his participants.

Using their practical-evaluative agency, the TEs in this study simultaneously managed curriculum, relationships, instructional techniques, classroom climate, and assessment while remaining responsive to the cultural, structural, and material conditions

of their contexts (McKoy & Lind, 2022). This responsiveness demonstrated how the TEs used this form of agency to support multidimensional culturally responsive teaching. Max's commitment to adapt to diverse populations further enhanced his approach: “I have a lot of Montessori teachers ... but then I have other ones who have doctoral degrees in bassoon performance and musicology.” As Max explained, this diversity in his student population required flexible teaching strategies that could simultaneously engage practitioners with vastly different backgrounds and expertise. Beyond adapting to unique learner profiles and program structures, the TEs also demonstrated their practical-evaluative agency through how they balanced maintaining high standards while providing differentiated support systems for teacher-participants.

Embodying “High Standards, High Support”

In the focus group conversations, the TEs shared ways in which they strove to maintain high standards while simultaneously providing ample support. Mary articulated this tension, noting “the standard is still the standard, and I believe most teachers can reach it—some people just need more time to reach it or need a different support strategy.” Mary's approach to student self-doubt particularly demonstrated her empowering orientation. When participants expressed uncertainty, she responded firmly, “I refuse to accept that. I know you can do better.” This reflected both her vision for student potential and her understanding of systemic barriers that often undermine confidence. Mary's approach to building confidence highlighted this empowering perspective, as she anchored to her own experience: “It took somebody believing in me too ... somebody that believed I could be successful.” This empowering stance affirmed

her students' capabilities while challenging internalized limitations, creating space for them to take ownership of their learning and build confidence in their abilities.

Mary's empowering approach to individual confidence-building was complemented by Max's commitment to supporting teacher authenticity, which further illustrated this "high standards, high support" philosophy. Max encouraged participants to "Keep your own voice. If you have something that's you or individual, it makes you unique ... it's really powerful for when they're teaching children to keep their voice." Like Mary's insistence that participants could "do better," Max's emphasis on authenticity maintained high expectations while providing a supportive atmosphere for teachers to develop their pedagogical identities. This perspective aligns with Gay's (2018) emphasis on empowering education as developing "self-determination, social consciousness, political acuity, emotional resilience, and personal integrity" (p. 41). Extending this empowering approach beyond individual relationships, the TEs also developed systems to leverage the collective knowledge and skills present in their classrooms.

Utilizing Peer Learning and Empowering Assignment Structures

Crystal's implementation of "Homework Lab" similarly demonstrated multidimensional and empowering support structures around composing and arranging tasks. By collecting assignment submissions the night before to identify common challenges and later facilitating peer review, Crystal created learning environments that supported both academic growth and community building. This approach was a response to immediate student needs across social, emotional, intellectual, and musical dimensions, empowering teacher-participants as they developed skills that would support

their independent musicianship when back in their classrooms. Relatedly, Crystal's Homework Lab approach stands in deliberate opposition to the single-opportunity, opaque-criteria assessment that once excluded her from accessing a performing ensemble in her childhood. While maintaining standardized assessment criteria, Crystal transformed single-opportunity assessments into collaborative revision sessions better suited to contemporary learners. These adaptations illustrated how TEs can sustain Orff Schulwerk's pedagogical foundations while experimenting with strategies to address current learning needs and cultural contexts. Through her Homework Lab, Crystal exhibited practical-evaluative agency by addressing immediate learner needs in real time.

Max's video feedback approach further illustrated multidimensional and empowering teaching. Because the year-long format afforded more time in between class sessions, Max had time to create customized feedback videos, which allowed teacher-participants to review their feedback many times, if needed, and on their own timelines. This feedback approach, along with clearly articulated assessment criteria outlined in a checklist and rubric, empowered teacher-participants to engage with the material more meaningfully.

Peer learning was a strategy all of the TEs used to support participant empowerment. The TEs discussed how they formatted classes to encourage teacher-participants to "bounce ideas off of each other so that they can get the resources they need within that dynamic." The TEs agreed that the participants may have the answers among themselves, and hearing other approaches to explaining concepts is helpful, as "hearing another person say it, how they say it makes a difference to them."

Through Crystal's homework lab and the others' similar approaches, the TEs used multiple empowering strategies to honor the assets of the collective class while providing as-needed resources for individual learners. For example, they provided checklists, rubrics, and unstructured class time before class began—"They actually thirst for that. That's why they come early now." The TEs aimed to write their assignments prompts clearly and designed them to build on each other cumulatively. All TEs spoke of modeling examples in class and providing examples and non-examples. Some provided in-class assignments; others offered pre-homework assignments in small groups distinct from individual course assignments. Additionally, some TEs had participants do the work first with a peer group before starting a related assignment individually, using an "I do, we do, you do" arc.

Projective Agency (Future Dimension) and Connections to Communities of Practice

The projective dimension of teacher agency encompasses how educators envision and work toward alternative futures for music education. This forward-looking orientation corresponds with the transformative and emancipatory qualities of culturally responsive teaching and emerged prominently in the focus group conversations. Although Eva and Max exhibited projective agency as they discussed their course director roles in their individual interviews, the most compelling evidence of TE projective agency emerged in the focus group setting as TEs interrogated systemic issues and collectively identified areas of concern within the organization.

The focus group setting provided a safe space for surfacing and discussing concerns that felt too complex or challenging to address at Continuing Teacher Educator

Development (CTED) sessions, the 75-minute meetings held for TEs once a year at the national conference. Both Max and Eva noted that the CTED sessions may come out of good intentions but in practice feel like they reinforce the hierarchy within the larger “macro” TE community of practice (Wenger, 1999), as the most established or confident TEs were perceived as dominating the conversation. Using Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation to explain this divide, they noticed the differences between “newcomers” and the veteran members or “old-timers” (p. 12) were particularly noticeable in that space. This highlighted how some professional development practices can inadvertently constrain and marginalize teacher voices rather than strengthen them.

Contrary to the lack of individual agency the TEs perceived in the CTED session, the TEs valued their more intimate community of practice (CoP) experience in the focus group, as it functioned more as a “micro” CoP. As the TEs considered critical questions, such as *What is quality Orff Schulwerk and who gets to decide? Are we Orff Schulwerk teacher educators if we let everyone in? Is the AOSA or the Orff Institute doing it the ‘right’ way?*, they challenged their long-held beliefs and considered alternative ways of knowing the world. Among colleagues they deemed trustworthy, they were able to move beyond surface level conversation and into dialogue that required vulnerability and trust. In the following subsections, I will explain how the focus group experience activated the agency of the TEs in this study while providing space for them to interrogate complex issues and discuss innovative approaches to their work.

Experiencing the Focus Group as Projective Agency Activator

The focus group itself functioned as agency activator, “creating opportunities for cognitive dissonance ... that often lead to new learning and agency through the constructive development of teacher beliefs, professional discourses, and professional knowledge” (Tucker, 2020, p. 33). Its retreat-like ambience, set apart from day-to-day teaching stressors, allowed participants to engage in extended dialogue with trusted colleagues and consider philosophical questions instead of logistical concerns. The power of these focus group discussions revealed the profound impact of teachers learning from other teachers, strengthening their professionalism and sense of agency through collaborative exchange. Contrary to the hierarchy perceived in the CTED sessions, the power dynamic in the focus group felt horizontal. Though they had served as TEs for different numbers of years, the most experienced TE, Mary, did not assume the veteran role in the group; instead, each TE brought their experiences from outside their TE role into their contributions, fostering an egalitarian and democratic energy. The TEs alternated between center and periphery, with each taking turns listening as others shared expertise in their areas of strength.

By leaning on the expertise of colleagues rather than those with official power, participants felt more empowered in their roles and developed stronger connections to their teacher identities. This suggests that professional development might be most transformative when it creates spaces for educators to collectively reflect, challenge established practices and reimagine their work through the lens of their own lived experiences and contexts. This study’s findings strongly support Spruce et al.’s (2021)

emphasis on connecting professional development to teachers' specific contexts—in this case, AOSA Teacher Education courses.

Participants perceived their engagement in the focus group discussions as meaningful professional learning. This experience directly exemplifies Spruce et al.'s (2021) framework for professional development for teacher agency, which present three distinct dimensions: reflexive discourse that interrogates established beliefs, context-specific adaptation to unique educational environments, and collaborative inquiry that functions as an agency activator. The reflective nature of these discussions created conditions for agency development that traditional professional development approaches can fail to achieve. These discussions demonstrated characteristics of Shieh's (2021) “collaborative policy inquiry,” as participants moved from individual concerns to collaborative problem-solving as they discussed their perceptions of gatekeeping in the organization.

Interrogating Gatekeeping and Committed to Transformational Change from the Inside Out

A question emerged in the focus group dialogue that illuminated the impact of this transformative and emancipatory dialogue: “*What is ‘quality’ Orff Schulwerk and who gets to decide?*” As Eva summarized, as a community becomes an official organization, boundaries emerge, and with boundaries comes the urge to keep some people out. Eva continued, “and that's where I think the gatekeeping begins.”

This question of belonging as it relates to gatekeeping was prevalent in the dialogue about course assignments. The TEs agreed that, without TE intervention and

care, the required composing and arranging course assignments might exacerbate the power differential and sense of hierarchy in courses. They noted that teachers who may be otherwise highly effective may feel disconnected from the Orff Schulwerk approach, which is supposed to be experiential in practice. As one TE added, “So, in that sense, the curriculum itself has this element of gatekeeping, if we are to follow it strictly.” Yet another TE pushed back, posing, “Is it not their responsibility to be broad? Not just to be able to make [their students] strong musicians, but to give them the skill of reading—the skill of notating ... if you're making music educators and not just musicians?” This conversation broadened into dialogue about who belongs in Orff Schulwerk teacher education, noting that other types of teachers (reading specialists, librarians) come to Orff Schulwerk for different reasons, and if they are treated as second-class citizens, one TE noted, “that's gatekeeping too.”

The TEs agreed that AOSA may have lessons to learn about inclusivity from the Orff Institute. When Max talked about his inclusive experience at the Institute, his description prompted the group to discuss: “*Are we striving toward the right aims? Are we being inclusive? Are we welcoming of all educators who for themselves have a connection to the Orff approach that will serve them in their lives or work?*” Mary reflected back to the group, “I don't have the experiences [at the Institute] that you guys have, but ... I think that needs to be our focus as opposed to what we've created it to be because what we have has a lot more gatekeeping underneath it as opposed to the original design.” In response, Eva noted, “[If] you're hoarding and cherry picking who gets access to the opportunities or to the knowledge ... it usually reveals that there's something about

that organization—that they're dealing with their own insecurity.”

The TEs also reflected on their perceptions of gatekeeping around accessing the TE role. One TE noted progress, suggesting “it used to be that TEs got tapped on the shoulder—come back and be my apprentice—so at least there's that element that they're trying to change.” With its structured process and intentions of improving transparency and clarity, one TE observed that “the AOSA seems aware that there is this element of gatekeeping and they're trying to work against that, but there are still people who think there's gatekeeping around who gets to do it.” Max reflected on how “daunting” the application process was—the “pages and pages and pages,” noting “I understand why they do it, but it's not easy.” Max also expressed concerns about required DEIA modules, acknowledging their value yet worrying that such requirements might inadvertently create barriers that discourage qualified candidates from applying who “could do much more” for Orff Schulwerk.

The TEs recognized that addressing gatekeeping requires honest self-reflection and humility. As Eva noted, this kind of transformative work demands what she called *självdistans*—a Swedish concept meaning “self-distance.” She continued:

It's basically the idea that we don't take [ourselves] too seriously. You take a step back away from you ... It allows you to not be so wound up into your own thing, and then also to just examine and see, I'm a human being and I'm not perfect, and I have biases. I make mistakes. And it allows you, I guess, more grace for yourself and then other people too.

Uncovering Implicit Bias

The focus group environment enabled participants to surface experiences of exclusion and elitism that might have otherwise remained hidden. Despite formal inclusion in TE roles, participants described feeling like outsiders within their own professional community. As Crystal observed, there remains a sense that “I’m a TE, but I’m not a *TE*,” suggesting that informal hierarchies and insider groups persist despite organizational efforts toward inclusion. Mary’s experience as a Black woman revealed how legitimacy is continually questioned through shifting expectations, describing how “the line keeps changing” regardless of achievements or credentials. Her observation that “somebody’s got to be under me for me to feel strong” pointed to deeper systemic patterns of exclusion that operate beyond individual bias. These revelations suggest that formal inclusion in TE roles does not automatically translate to full acceptance or belonging within professional communities, and that safe spaces for dialogue may be essential for uncovering and addressing these hidden dynamics.

Max’s decision to share his previously unspoken observation about a colleague’s racist dismissal of Mary’s conference session (described earlier) provided crucial validation for her experiences of bias within AOSA. By offering this corroborating evidence, Max transformed what might have remained an individual grievance into collective understanding, demonstrating how the focus group’s safe environment enabled participants to build solidarity and shared agency for addressing systemic exclusion within their professional community. This exchange emancipated the TEs’ assumptions or hopes that the AOSA as an organization was culturally responsive as a system and

opened up a different possible future, one in which there was more work to be done. As Lave and Wenger (1991) noted, as CoP members participate in a community, the community changes. The revelations about implicit bias created space for TEs to examine other sensitive cultural issues that affected their teaching practice.

Unpacking Cultural Appropriation

The focus group provided space for the TEs to dig into important topics, such as cultural appropriation, that typically get overlooked amidst the day-to-day “fire hose” of immediate issues that surface during Levels courses (e.g., room logistics, scheduling conflicts, pacing concerns). These pressing logistical concerns leave little time or capacity for deep reflection on sensitive cultural matters. Without dedicated time and space for such dialogue, TEs may not feel equipped or courageous enough to address cultural appropriation in their practice. When Eva told a story about her husband wearing a traditional Filipino outfit to an event—initially he was concerned about cultural appropriation, but she encouraged him to wear it—the story opened up dialogue about “the lens—it’s the interpretation.”

This sharing opened the door and bolstered the courage and projective agency of the other TEs. For example, as Eva shared her story about cultural appropriation, Max felt inspired to process his own cognitive dissonance around bringing in cultural materials that seemed beyond his cultural background. He shared, “Well, who else is going to do it? Sorry, they hired a white guy!” Mary replied, “If you don’t do it, who’s going to do it?” And Max felt supported, suggesting, “And I was willing and brave enough to do that which was more out of my skill set but that’s the beauty of it. And then I’m showing

appreciation.” Mary added, “And they love you more.”

Through this story, the TEs illustrated how CoP members contribute different expertise as they work toward shared purposes and a shared understanding that they continuously negotiate (Zaffini, 2018). In this case, Eva and Mary brought their expertise in cultural competence and were able to turn Max’s story into a teachable moment for the group. This exchange bolstered Max’s clarity of conviction while simultaneously strengthening the group’s collective agency.

Ideating about Innovative Approaches

When given an invitation to dream and imagine—“*How might Orff Schulwerk contribute to the transformation of music education?*”—the TEs’ responses revealed a clear departure from traditional music education paradigms. Their vision emphasized collaborative, assets-based approaches that prioritize student agency and cultural responsiveness over technical virtuosity. This ideation process demonstrates how safe spaces for visionary thinking can unlock educators’ capacity to imagine more equitable practices.

The TEs’ focus on multi-genre artistry, integration, and using students’ cultural assets as “springboards” for music making reflected a fundamental shift from deficit-based to asset-based pedagogies. Their recognition that creative processes “are used in all aspects of our world” suggests an understanding of music education’s potential to develop transferable skills rather than just technical proficiency. This perspective aligns with culturally sustaining teaching that honor and build upon students’ existing knowledge and experiences.

Notably, the TEs envisioned Orff Schulwerk extending beyond elementary contexts into secondary spaces traditionally dominated by performing ensembles. Their conception of an approach where “everyone has a role to play” and “it’s not about the most excellent musicians” challenges hierarchical structures that privilege certain forms or musical expression over others. This vision suggests that when educators feel empowered to imagine alternatives, they naturally gravitate toward inclusive practices that serve “tomorrow’s people” rather than just “tomorrow’s musicians.”

The focus group setting created space for questioning long standing assumptions and cultural norms that might otherwise have remained hidden, illustrating how reflective discourse can lead to transformative insights about organizational practices. The significance of this reflection lies in participants' willingness to name and call out perceived inequitable practices while collectively laying the groundwork to rectify them. Such candid examination demonstrates the deep reflexive work essential for agency development.

The Integration of Agency and Cultural Responsiveness

The six qualities of culturally responsive teaching, viewed through the lens of teacher agency's temporal dimensions, reveal the complex ways TEs navigate between past influences, present demands, and future aspirations in creating responsive learning environments. This integration suggests that effective teacher education requires educators to simultaneously draw upon their past experiences, respond to present needs, and work toward more inclusive futures—balancing all three temporal aspects to create truly responsive teaching contexts

This framework helps illuminate how culturally responsive teaching is not simply a set of static practices but rather a dynamic approach requiring thoughtful understanding of temporal and ecological dimensions. By mapping culturally responsive qualities across temporal dimensions—from drawing on past experiences to create validating environments to projecting emancipatory futures—music educators can gain insights into how TEs balance tradition and innovation while working toward more inclusive and equitable music education. This analysis has revealed the complex interplay between teacher agency and culturally responsive teaching in Orff Schulwerk teacher education.

These findings have meaningful implications that extend beyond Orff Schulwerk to teacher education broadly. The ecological understanding of teacher agency suggests that effective teacher education programs should attend to all three temporal dimensions. Such programs should create opportunities for educators to reflect on past experiences, respond skillfully to present circumstances, and envision transformative futures. Professional development that neglects any of these dimensions may limit educators' capacity for meaningful agency in their practice. Additionally, the findings challenge common approaches to policy implementation in teacher education. Rather than treating policies as fixed prescriptions, this study suggests that effective teacher education programs create what Bylica and Schmidt (2024) call "policymaking spaces" where educators can thoughtfully interpret and contextualize guidelines while maintaining programmatic coherence.

In addition, the integration of culturally responsive teaching within an established pedagogical tradition provides a template for how other specialized approaches might

evolve toward greater inclusivity without abandoning their foundational strengths. The TEs' inclusion of Gay's (2018) six qualities demonstrates that cultural responsiveness can enhance rather than dilute pedagogical traditions across educational contexts. Finally, this study highlights the critical role of TEs as agents of change within educational systems. Through their thoughtful contributions to this study, Eva, Mary, Max, and Crystal have illuminated how tradition and innovation can work hand in hand to strengthen teacher agency and how collective dialogue can unlock possibilities that individual efforts alone cannot realize.

CHAPTER SEVEN: IMPLICATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In this study, I utilized a qualitative case study approach to examine how a group of Orff Schulwerk teacher educators (TEs) navigated their roles as both preservers of tradition and agents of change within the American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA). In this research, I used multiple data collection methods across two phases; Phase 1 consisted of document analysis and semi-structured interviews, and Phase 2 consisted of a focus group and participant reflections. Four TEs representing different regions and demographic backgrounds were selected to capture diverse viewpoints within the AOSA.

Two primary research questions guided this investigation. First, how did the Orff Schulwerk TEs perceive and use their agency to serve as arbiters of tradition or instigators of change in AOSA Teacher Education? Second, how did the TEs' achievement of agency align or conflict with the aims of the AOSA? The findings revealed that the four TEs in this study demonstrated artful integration of traditional Orff Schulwerk principles with innovative adaptive strategies to foster culturally responsive music teaching in their courses. Despite this individual agency achievement at the classroom level and AOSA's stated commitment to inclusive music education, perceived implicit social hierarchies within the organization continued to constrain system-wide implementation of culturally responsive practices. Notably, the collaborative dialogue facilitated through the focus group emerged as a powerful catalyst, enabling these TEs to establish a network of mutual support and collectively envision initial steps toward change to address organizational barriers, illustrating the potential of intentional collaboration among AOSA TEs.

In addition, the concept of *självdistans*, or self-distance, that Eva introduced during the focus group offered not just a cultural understanding but a pathway forward for AOSA TEs to examine their own relationship to organizational barriers. The central implication of this study is that TEs need and value structured opportunities for this type of critical reflection in order to understand their relationship to systemic barriers and consider how to address them. In this chapter, I explore the implications of these findings for understanding the value of structured dialogue between TEs around organizational and pedagogical challenges in AOSA Teacher Education. These insights offer both theoretical contributions to our understanding of teacher agency and practical implications for how professional development might be structured to foster agency development.

The Power of Dialogue: Professional Learning Communities as Transformative Framework (RQ1 & RQ2)

The focus group experience revealed how structured dialogue among TEs has the potential to support TE agency. Although the four TEs in this study demonstrated remarkable agency within their own classrooms, the focus group created space for them to articulate challenges they experienced in isolation and find solidarity in their experiences. Moving to application, this finding suggests that professional learning communities (PLCs) offer a systematic framework for scaling this type of dialogue across the AOSA community.

Implementing Professional Learning Communities for Teacher Educators

The focus group, which functioned as an informal professional learning community, demonstrated the potential for nurturing TE agency across all of Priestley et al.'s (2015) temporal dimensions: iterational (past), practical-evaluative (present), and projective (future). Notably, the focus group served as a particularly powerful space for fostering projective agency—the dimension focused on envisioning future possibilities. When teacher education courses are in session, TEs use their agency to address immediate concerns or near-term planning rather than zooming out to think strategically about future directions. Providing a PLC structure for TEs during the school year, which is the off season for nearly all courses, might support TE projective agency most of all.

Evidence of the value of the PLC-like focus group was further supported in the TEs' follow-up reflections. The TEs valued the intentionality of the focus group prompts and protocols, the dedicated time and space to reflect and reimagine, and the structure provided by a facilitator. As Priestley et al. (2015) suggested, effective facilitation involves providing guidance while allowing participants to develop their own interpretations, an approach that supports rather than constrains teacher agency. The community that came together for the focus group continued in the weeks and months that followed through a group chat. This authentic continuation of the dialogue emerged through spontaneous shared celebrations and moments of checking in with questions as trusted colleagues. The focus group fostered a meaningful PLC for Crystal, Eva, Mary, and Max.

Building Support Networks: Creating Sustainable Communities of Practice.

Based on study findings, AOSA could support TE agency and continued professional learning through structured PLCs of three to five TEs, grouping educators intentionally to reflect the diversity within AOSA, similar to the approach used in this study. This structure would allow for sufficient diversity of perspective while maintaining intimacy and psychological safety. This approach would provide varied perspectives, while taking care to place assertive voices in groups where they would not dominate the dialogue. Although it would be impossible to ensure immediate rapport from the start, AOSA could design guidance to foster trust, safety, and ease. PLCs would offer spaces where TEs could engage in sustained collaborative inquiry.

Spaces for Cross-Pollination. The focus group provided space for the cross-pollination of ideas across courses and faculties. This may be the kind of dialogue and exchange of ideas that the AOSA aims to nurture through the annual Continuing Teacher Education Development (CTED) session at the national conference, yet the TEs in this study noted that the CTED format does not meet their needs in that way. Perhaps the year-long break in between sessions sets up the session to feel disconnected from TE work or, alternatively, 75 minutes is insufficient time for a year's worth of dialogue. Additionally, TEs must divide their attention at the national conference, from facilitating other sessions, to connecting with friends and colleagues, to committee or board work sessions. Rather than centering CTED around the annual conference session, TEs may benefit from year-round collaborative learning, with the conference serving to synthesize and celebrate ongoing work. To foster TE agency, TEs may benefit from ongoing small-

group collaborations that integrate theory and practice, allowing ideas to develop and evolve through continuous dialogue.

TE Affinity Groups. In the years leading up to this study, the AOSA's DEIA committee had been experimenting with member-initiated and -led affinity groups based on shared interests or identities. This model offers a promising framework for designing TE PLCs. Each affinity group had self-appointed facilitators and met at different frequencies based on member needs. A few times a year, the affinity group facilitators connected with the larger DEIA committee for check-ins and updates, while the groups remained largely self-directed.

In some ways, this model resembles the Society for Music Teacher Education's (SMTE) Areas for Strategic Planning and Action (ASPA) groups. SMTE members select areas of interest to develop resources and projects around specific topics. Although SMTE is more research-focused than AOSA as an organization, the ASPA groups help shape discourse around particular aspects of practice on a voluntary basis.

TE-initiated affinity groups could address a variety of relevant issues emerging from practice. For example, the topic of assignments surfaced frequently in individual interviews and the focus group. The TEs' consistent focus on these academic requirements revealed how deeply they experienced the tension between Orff Schulwerk's experiential philosophy and the formal structures of teacher education—a disconnect that led them to question fundamental assumptions about quality, belonging, and gatekeeping within their practice. Although the TEs had explored these challenges

individually and learned from colleagues informally, they expressed eagerness to engage in sustained collaborative dialogue about these tensions.

Other potential topics might include teaching elemental music concepts through world musics, fostering community in Levels courses, accessibility and inclusion in movement, or designing meaningful end-of-course “sharings” or performances. To foster projective agency, TEs might need encouragement to engage in conversations that are more philosophical than tactical. A particularly valuable focus could be examining gatekeeping practices within AOSA, building on the insights uncovered by the TEs in this study and extending their preliminary explorations.

Problems of Practice. One specific structure that could enhance these TE affinity groups involves incorporating collaborative problem-solving around authentic classroom challenges. In the focus group, each TE brought a “problem of practice” to the conversation, providing an opportunity for the group to consider solutions to day-to-day, real-life problems. This collaborative problem-solving approach leveraged the combined wisdom of peer TEs to address specific challenges faced across contexts.

Fostering Projective Agency: Envisioning Organizational Transformation

The focus group demonstrated how structured dialogue can foster projective agency—TEs’ capacity to imagine new futures. In the language of culturally responsive teaching, they considered how they might teach to transform and emancipate. The following suggestions relate to approaches specifically designed to foster projective agency.

Future-focused Visioning Exercises. Invite TEs to articulate their aspirations for music education (not just Orff Schulwerk or AOSA Teacher Education). With the group, identify pathways toward realizing these visions within their specific teaching environments with both children and adults. For example, future classroom scenario planning activities might ask TEs to envision their ideal music classroom five to ten years in the future, considering changes in student demographics, technological developments, and evolving educational priorities, then work backward to identify concrete steps they could take now to begin moving toward that vision. These opportunities for creative imagining help TEs transcend reactive approaches to current challenges and instead become architects of new educational possibilities.

Expanding Musical Traditions. Exploring a range of cultural approaches to music-making would further expand TEs' capacity for projective agency achievement. By engaging with musical traditions from various global cultures, TEs would develop broader conceptual frameworks for understanding musical learning and expression. For instance, PLC members could explore how musical traditions from a variety of cultures might be respectfully integrated to teach concepts typically introduced in AOSA Teacher Education with attention to cultural context.

Experimental Composition Approaches. A PLC focused on experimental composition could stretch TEs' creative boundaries with the support of peer TEs, encouraging them to develop original musical materials and teaching approaches that respond to their students' unique interests and needs. For TEs who feel their composing and arranging skills reach their limits with the Level III Teacher Education expectations,

this would provide an opportunity for TEs to think beyond what they need to prepare for the next class and experiment with new ideas that elevate their personal artistry.

Technology Integration. A technology integration-focused PLC would provide collaborative support for TEs to explore how digital tools might enhance or transform Orff Schulwerk-inspired learning experiences, from simple recording and playback technologies to more complex digital composition platforms. As Max described during the focus group, technology integration might involve students creating multi-genre compositions by drawing on elemental fragments of music. In his elementary music classroom, students used digital tools like GarageBand to record different musical motives and then combine them into original compositions—a modern parallel to the elemental building-block concept introduced in Orff Schulwerk. By sharing and building on each other's varied approaches, TEs might develop the confidence to take pedagogical risks using technology while maintaining connection to the essential principles that define the Orff approach.

Spotlighting Innovation. Specifically for AOSA—whose mission includes demonstrating the value of Orff Schulwerk and promoting its widespread use, supporting the professional development of its members, and inspiring and advocating for the creative potential of all learners—organization leadership might consider how its structures could more explicitly encourage creative reimagining of the approach for contemporary contexts, perhaps through dedicated innovation grants, publication opportunities for forward-thinking practitioners, or conference sessions focused on emergent practices. One strategy might include intentionally bringing voices from outside

the AOSA community to publish in *The Orff Echo*, exposing members to diverse perspectives that might spark imagination about what is possible in contemporary music education. TEs themselves require both permission and support to model innovative approaches, particularly when these push beyond conventional interpretations of Orff Schulwerk. Additionally, AOSA might implement recognition systems that acknowledge and celebrate collective achievements alongside individual accomplishments, reinforcing the value of collaborative professional growth and shared expertise development.

Aligning Individual and Organizational Goals: Bridging TE Agency and AOSA Aims

Organizations navigating the balance between preserving identity and supporting healthy evolution face the challenge of distinguishing their essential character from practices that may be more contextually bound. The dialogue with the TEs raised a critical question: which elements represent non-negotiable aspects of Orff Schulwerk's identity, and which function as adaptive practices that can evolve with changing needs? Continually wrestling with this question may be the most essential work of organizational leadership—clarifying which aspects are essential and which are cultural artifacts of specific times and places. When organizations can clearly articulate their core principles—those fundamental to their identity—while explicitly encouraging innovation within defined boundaries, they create conditions where individual agency and institutional goals align productively.

To bridge the gap between TE agency and AOSA's organizational commitment to inclusive music education, the introduction of carefully designed "what if" scenarios could strengthen TEs' capacity for the real-time adaptations required in dynamic

classroom environments. These scenarios might include adapting instrumental arrangements when certain instruments are unavailable, modifying activities when confronted with unexpected time constraints, or managing unexpected student absences. Through these practical exercises, TEs could develop not only a repertoire of adaptive strategies but also the confidence to make spontaneous but supported pedagogical decisions.

This practical-evaluative dimension of agency enables teachers to navigate the immediate demands of their classroom contexts while maintaining fidelity to the approach's core values. This focus on pragmatic application, grounded in the real-life challenges of public-school settings in particular (Frazee, 2012), ensures that TEs prioritize the importance of transferability beyond the idealized environment of an AOSA Teacher Education course. It reminds participants that these studio-like experiences are indeed a laboratory for real-world application. Crucially, modeling this flexibility as a TE—whether encountering less than ideal teaching spaces or responding graciously to students with mobility limitations, visual impairments, or other exceptionalities—provides practical knowledge for inclusive music education. This approach aligns individual TE growth with AOSA's broader mission of advocating for all learners.

Revisiting and Revising Personal Narratives. Another potential PLC learning activity surfaced in the process of member checks. After individual interviews, all participants were invited to read over their transcripts and drafts of their participant profiles to provide clarification or feedback. Essentially, this was an opportunity to revisit and revise their words or position. The four TEs provided different levels of feedback,

from a sign off with no edits to substantial feedback with dozens of edits. Notably, Mary used this opportunity to analyze what she had said and refine her words, resulting in a tone that was less reactive and more reflective. Mary's investment in getting her words just right prompted thinking about the value of what might be gained by revisiting transcripts, individually and collectively, from group conversations. Reviewing transcripts might provide an entry point for interrogating beliefs while also creating space to shape evolving approaches. Participants could benefit from opportunities to revisit their earlier contributions and engage in conversations about how their perspectives have shifted over time. This practice of returning to previous statements—whether after days, months, or years—could create space for demonstrating growth and bringing one's evolved understanding back to the community. This approach would support agency across dimensions, but particularly iterational agency, where individuals could track their evolving positions or learnings.

From Off-Season PLCs to In-Season Collaborative Teams. In the focus group conversations, the TEs took an unexpected detour in a structured conversation to talk about potentially collaborating during their teacher education courses during the summer of 2025. They were energized by the idea of using the same children's book as a source of inspiration for a class activity and then sharing their approaches with one another while their courses were in session. They envisioned each TE beginning with the same foundational ingredient—the book—while personalizing their facilitation approaches and allowing unique participant contributions to shape different outcomes. Comparing these varied interpretations across different cohorts could reveal valuable insights about how

collaborative learning emerges in different educational spaces.

Annual CTED National Conference Session Reframed as PLC Showcase. If AOSA were to establish an ongoing PLC structure that kept professional learning work moving forward throughout the year, then the CTED session in November could be an opportunity for each of the PLCs (small communities of practice) to share their learning with the larger community of practice—all teacher educators. Each PLC would have the opportunity to share the topics and questions explored in their group, creating cross-pollination in action. Perhaps some PLCs—those who opt in to more robust collaborative work—could seek financial support from AOSA toward action research or piloting projects across different courses. This structure could shift the CTED energy from annual meeting to professional learning showcase.

How To Get Started with TE PLCs. It is important to note that the TEs in this study consented to participate in this research. It would be impossible to replicate the retreat-like setting experienced by the focus group for all PLCs, but some structures could be carried forward into a PLC initiative. My recommendation would be for AOSA to start with opt-in PLCs. Provide structures and protocols with discussion questions and potentially provide a facilitator to help establish norms and routines. As gatekeeping was a problem identified by all TEs in the study, it would be essential to make sure that all TEs feel included in this work. These communities would benefit from flexible “engagement menus” that offer multiple ways to participate (voice memos, text messages, written reflection, synchronous discussion), honoring different communication preferences and schedules. Also, it may take a few iterations for AOSA to figure out how

PLCs work best for its teacher educators.

Supporting TE Agency Through Anchoring, Adapting, and Experimenting (RQ1)

Study findings revealed that TEs consistently used their agency to reach teacher-participants in culturally responsive ways, moving between traditional and innovative approaches as the situation demanded. Rather than viewing these as opposing forces, TEs demonstrated a more nuanced approach that involved anchoring to core principles, adapting to meet diverse needs, and experimenting with new possibilities.

To support this multifaceted work in PLCs, structured conversations around these three approaches—anchoring, adapting, and experimenting—could deepen TE reflection and foster collaborative growth. Table 1 presents discussion questions organized by these three dimensions to facilitate meaningful discussions that honor both the integrity of Orff Schulwerk and the imperative for culturally responsive practice.

Table 1

Discussion Questions: Supporting Teacher Educator Growth in Orff Schulwerk Practices

Anchoring	Honoring and Preserving Core Orff Schulwerk Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which core Orff Schulwerk principles do we consider truly foundational versus those that might be cultural artifacts of a specific time and place? How do we make these distinctions? • How can we collectively deepen our understanding of Orff Schulwerk principles rather than just maintaining superficial adherence? What does authentic engagement with these principles look like in our practice?
Adapting	Responsive Modifications to Meet Diverse Student Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What adaptation strategies have we developed that we might hesitate to share because of concerns about “authenticity”? How can we validate each other’s responsive modifications? • What culturally responsive modifications have we found effective in our teaching? How might we document and share these strategies to build a collective resource?

Experi- menting	Creating Innovative Approaches that Extend Traditional Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What risks do we perceive when experimenting with new approaches? How can we support each other as critical friends in taking pedagogical risks? • What innovative ideas have emerged from our individual practice? How might sharing these ideas spark new thinking that would not occur in isolation?
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Addressing Cultural Barriers Through Recognizing, Unpacking, and Transforming (RQ2)

Although individual TEs used their agency to implement culturally responsive teaching practices, this research uncovered systemic barriers that hindered organization-wide cultural responsiveness. These cultural barriers merit attention within PLCs, where their further interrogation in smaller communities of practice can generate insights that inform broader organizational dialogue among all AOSA teacher educators. Table 2 presents discussion questions organized around three key areas to structure PLC conversations about implicit hierarchies, cultural appropriation, and organizational constraints.

Table 2

Discussion Questions: Addressing Cultural Barriers in Orff Schulwerk

Recognizing	Identifying and Naming Implicit Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What hierarchical power structures exist within our organization that we rarely discuss openly? • How do these affect different members' experiences? • When we include music from other cultures in our teaching, how do we distinguish between appreciation and appropriation? What questions should we be asking ourselves? • What organizational policies, traditions, or unwritten rules limit our ability to implement culturally responsive teaching? Can we name specific examples from our own experience?
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Unpacking	Examining Root Causes and Impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When we have included music from other cultures, what have been our motivations? • How do we ensure we are moving beyond surface-level inclusion toward meaningful cultural exchange? • What assumptions about “good teaching” or “authentic Orff practice” do we hold that might actually reflect biases? • When we adapt world musics to fit familiar pedagogical frameworks, what gets lost or changed? What power dynamics are at play when we modify cultural practices to fit our teaching methods?
Transforming	Creating Pathways for Systemic Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What specific organizational barriers have we identified that limit culturally responsive teaching? What creative approaches could we try together to work within or around these constraints while maintaining our commitment to change? • What small-scale changes could we pilot in our own courses or contexts that align with our values? How might we document and share these experiments to build evidence for broader organizational change? • How do we maintain hope and energy for this work when institutional change feels slow? What support do we need from each other to stay engaged rather than becoming cynical or giving up?

Implications for Pre-service Music Teacher Preparation

Using the ecological teacher agency framework as a tool for structuring dialogue proved valuable for the AOSA TEs in this study and may benefit all music teacher preparation programs. Building on Tucker’s (2020) foundational work on agency development in music teacher education contexts, this study’s findings with AOSA TEs both confirm and extend those insights, demonstrating how understanding the three dimensions of agency—iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective—can help pre-service teachers develop professional identities that move beyond the skills-focused

approaches sometimes associated with general music methods courses. This framework addresses a critical gap in teacher preparation, as many educators later experience additional specialized teacher education courses like Orff Schulwerk as a “do-over” of their initial methods coursework. This suggests that pre-service preparation may inadequately prepare teachers for the complex realities of general music teaching.

University music teacher educators can leverage these findings by structuring coursework around the three agency dimensions. For iterational agency, faculty can help pre-service teachers recognize that they bring valuable past musical experiences into their future teaching roles, framing every musical experience from childhood through college as professional capital rather than viewing their background as inadequate. For practical-evaluative agency, faculty can reframe pre-service teachers’ understanding of policy, helping them recognize their capacity to influence their teaching environments, even when working in isolation. Regarding projective agency, university programs can deliberately structure conversations that encourage pre-service teachers to envision innovative possibilities beyond what they have witnessed in their program and consider long-term professional growth. As suggested by Tucker (2020), such an approach positions pre-service teachers as thoughtful professionals who can synthesize, adapt, innovate, and lead within their future teaching contexts.

Study Limitations

Although Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model and Gay's (2018) culturally responsive teaching framework provided valuable analytical lenses for this study, it is important to acknowledge their potential limitations. The ecological model of teacher

agency, with its emphasis on temporal dimensions, may not fully capture the nonlinear nature of agency development. TEs in this study sometimes described experiences where past, present, and future dimensions were so intertwined that separating them felt artificial. Additionally, this model was originally developed through research with K–12 teachers rather than TEs, potentially overlooking some of the unique aspects of working with adult learners in professional development contexts.

Gay's (2018) framework, although comprehensive in addressing multiple dimensions of culturally responsive teaching, emerged primarily from K–12 contexts focused on racial and ethnic diversity. Its application to adult professional development settings and to forms of diversity beyond race/ethnicity (such as musical background, pedagogical tradition, and professional identity) required some adaptation. The framework's emphasis on cultural validation sometimes oversimplified the complex nature of musical cultures, which are often hybrid and evolving rather than discrete and stable entities.

Both frameworks, despite their strengths, tend to emphasize individual agency and responsiveness without fully accounting for the broader neoliberal educational context that increasingly constrains teacher agency through standardization, measurement, and accountability pressures. Although this study focused primarily on TEs' achievement of agency within organizational structures, these broader systemic constraints deserve acknowledgment as potential limiting factors on the transformative potential of TE agency. These limitations suggest the need for theoretical frameworks that more specifically address the unique position of teachers working with adult learners

within established pedagogical traditions, particularly in arts education contexts where questions of tradition, innovation, and cultural responsiveness take on distinct dimensions compared to general education settings.

Beyond these theoretical considerations, several methodological limitations should be considered when interpreting this study's findings. First, the limited participant pool—four TEs from specific regions—may not capture the full diversity of experiences within AOSA Teacher Education nationally. Second, data collection occurred during a concentrated timeframe—October 2024 to February 2025—providing a snapshot rather than longitudinal perspective on TE practice. Third, the study's focus on TEs' perspectives, while valuable, lacks triangulation with course participant experiences. Including adult learners' perspectives on how TE agency and culturally responsive practices affected their learning would provide important complementary insights. Finally, this study did not systematically investigate AOSA's official organizational structures. Although participants discussed gatekeeping practices and hierarchical tensions, systematic investigation of AOSA's governance structures, decision-making processes, and historical power distributions was beyond the study's scope.

Future Research Implications

This study's findings illuminated several pathways for future research that could deepen understanding of TE agency and organizational transformation within specialized pedagogical communities. The discovery that structured dialogue fostered projective agency, along with findings about the persistence of cultural barriers despite policy progress, suggest rich areas for continued investigation. The following research directions

build on these findings and address gaps in our understanding of how individual agency and institutional structures intersect to shape professional practice.

Professional Learning Communities as Accelerators of Agency

The finding that a PLC-like focus group fostered projective agency suggests several research directions focused on optimal structures for TE development. Studies comparing TE learning in small communities of three to five members to traditional conference-based professional development could provide valuable insights into the relative effectiveness of these approaches. Studies utilizing critical participatory action research, which positions practitioners as co-researchers, could document the evolution of these communities over time while simultaneously addressing TEs' self-identified concerns.

Research investigating multi-modal engagement strategies—approaches that offer multiple pathways for participation and learning through varied communication channels and formats such as synchronous discussions, asynchronous reflection, and creative documentation—could help identify which approaches most effectively support sustained participation and professional growth. Such studies might examine whether technology-mediated communication between in-person meetings maintains momentum in professional learning and whether certain types of engagement (voice memos, written reflection, synchronous discussion) better support different dimensions of agency. Additionally, research should examine institutional contexts that enhance or constrain TE agency within these communities, particularly investigating how power dynamics shape professional opportunities and relationships.

Institutional Transformation and Power Distribution

The persistence of discriminatory practices, despite policy advancements, points to crucial research needs regarding institutional change within organizations like AOSA. Future research could extend these findings by examining how organizational structures in other specialized pedagogical communities enable or constrain TE agency. Comparative studies examining how AOSA's approaches to addressing institutional barriers compare with other professional organizations could provide insights for systemic change.

Several methodological approaches could advance this work. Discourse analysis could examine how power dynamics surface in professional conversations, while studies of horizontal communication structures could investigate their effectiveness in redistributing social capital within professional organizations. Additionally, research documenting embedded culturally responsive practices could examine the impact of articulating previously tacit knowledge and approaches.

Investigations of how TEs navigate cultural tensions—particularly around appropriation concerns—could provide practical guidance for those working across cultural contexts. Such research would benefit from participatory methodologies that center historically marginalized TEs' experiences within specialized pedagogical approaches like Orff Schulwerk.

Curriculum Implementation and Broader Impacts

Research is needed to examine how TEs interpret and implement curriculum documents like AOSA's Teacher Education Curriculum 5.0, given their potential as

powerful tools for change when thoughtfully implemented. Studies tracking the cascading effects of curriculum changes—from TE interpretation through implementation to impact on teacher participants and ultimately students—could illuminate how policy translates into practice across educational ecosystems. Studies of assessment frameworks that balance rigor with culturally responsive flexibility would be particularly valuable, given the finding that assessment practices often function as sites where power dynamics become visible.

Additionally, broader research connecting enhanced TE agency to community vitality and cultural sustainability might help position specialized approaches like Orff Schulwerk within larger educational and societal contexts. Such studies could examine how the communal music-making and embodied learning central to the approach contribute to community well-being beyond the music classroom, particularly in contexts of increasing polarization and diminishing civic connections.

These research directions build on this study's findings while addressing critical gaps in understanding of TE development. Through varied methodological approaches, researchers can contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical improvement in music teacher education. Ultimately, this work supports the development of teachers who can cultivate conditions that support vibrant, culturally responsive music education experiences for their students.

Concluding Thoughts: People Over Pedagogy

“People over pedagogy,” rang through the room, as others nodded along—Mary even quickly noted the phrase in her notebook. This powerful declaration captured the

essence of transformative education: that centering people—their experiences, needs, and dignity—must be valued alongside and sometimes above pedagogical conventions and longstanding traditions. This simple yet profound statement captured a central insight from this research—that although pedagogical traditions and institutional frameworks provided essential foundations, their full impact ultimately depended on how they came to life through the people who implemented them. The AOSA Teacher Education curriculum may establish important guidelines that support cultural responsiveness and innovation in addition to Orff Schulwerk core principles, but the lived enactment of the approach at its fullest potential depends on addressing the cultural challenges within the organization itself.

Looking forward, the field of music teacher education faces both challenges and opportunities. Demographic changes, evolving musical practices, and shifting educational priorities all demand thoughtful evolution of traditional approaches. The perspectives shared by the TEs in this study revealed their deep commitment to preparing and supporting future generations of music teachers. Through thoughtful attention to both individual and collective dimensions of TE agency, organizations like the AOSA can foster environments where TEs use their agency to advance inclusive and responsive music education. Ultimately, *självdistans*—the ability to view ourselves with clear-eyed emotional distance while maintaining deep self-respect—empowers TEs to honor tradition without being imprisoned by it, to adapt without surrendering identity, and to innovate with both courage and wisdom as they shape the future of music education.

APPENDIX A: Questions for Semi-structured Interviews with Teacher Educators

First Interview

Opening

- Name, Pseudonym
- Could you please state your name, and do you consent to being recorded for this interview?

Initial Thoughts (context, culture)

- Tell me a bit about your background and your journey to becoming a TE.
- Could you tell me a little bit about your current teaching situation(s)?
 - Could you tell me about the community you teach in? (course(s), course participants)
 - Is there anything that feels unusual or unique about your setting?
 - How long have you been a teacher educator?

Curriculum (beliefs, values, identity)

- Could you tell me a bit about yourself as a teacher? Who are you/what do you believe?
- Could you talk to me about how you design your curriculum?
- How does your teaching philosophy come through in your curriculum design?

AOSA Policy/Curriculum

- How do you use the AOSA Teacher Education Curriculum?

Bringing the ideas together

- In what ways, if any, does it have any impact on your teaching?

- Does the presence of the AOSA Teacher Education Curriculum Standards alter how you teach your class in any way?

Closing Ideas

- Is there anything else you would like to chat about or return to from earlier in our discussion?

Second Interview

Opening

- Is there anything we talked about last time that you would like to open with today?

Thinking Beyond the Obvious

- Tell me about your experience as a teacher educator. What has your experience been like?
 - In the classroom
 - How do you structure your classes?
 - What might a typical Day 1 look like for you?
 - What might a typical Day 10 look like for you?
 - Talk me through the arc of your courses, Day 1 to Day 10.
 - What are your biggest priorities on the first day?
 - In what ways have you worked or collaborated with other faculty members?
- What challenges have you faced as a TE?
- Could you tell me about a time you made a change of plans?

- Could you tell me about a time you adjusted what or how you taught based on the teacher-participants in the room?

Closing Ideas

- Is there anything else you would like to chat about or return to from earlier in our discussion?

APPENDIX B: Focus Group Participant Guide

Investigating Teacher Educator Agency in AOSA Teacher Education

January 11, 2025 | Minneapolis, MN

Schedule

- 9:00–10:15 Session I
 10:15–10:45 Morning Break
 10:45–12:00 Session II
 12:00–2:00 Midday Break (lunch on your own, take a walk, relax)
 2:00–3:15 Session III

Research Questions

1. In what ways, if any, did the Orff Schulwerk TEs perceive and use their agency to serve as arbiters of tradition or instigators of change in AOSA Teacher Education?
2. In what ways, if any, did these TEs' achievement of agency align or conflict with the aims of the AOSA

Participant Agenda

<i>Topic</i>	<i>What are we doing?</i>	<i>Why are we doing it?</i>
Session I 9:00–10:15 <i>Navigating Tradition and Innovation in Orff Schulwerk</i>	1) Position Yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explore how teacher educators navigate and articulate the tension between tradition and innovation
	2) World Café	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To gather deeper insights by having small groups build on each other's ideas in a comfortable, active setting
Session II 10:45–12:00 <i>Examining Our Teacher Educator Practices</i>	3) Problem of Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To collaboratively analyze teaching challenges faced by Orff educators through focused group dialogue
	4) Success Analysis Protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To draw out principles of effective teaching practice by examining authentic success stories from TE experiences
Session III 2:00–3:15 <i>The Future of Orff Schulwerk</i>	5) Reimagining Music Education Through Orff Schulwerk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To envision how Orff pedagogy could transform music education by connecting individual visions to collective action • To synthesize key insights about teacher educator agency in Orff Schulwerk through final collective reflection

APPENDIX C: Focus Group Protocol, Session 1

Session 1 | Navigating Tradition and Innovation in Orff Schulwerk (9:00–10:15)

1) Position Yourself

Tradition vs. Innovation | Where would you position yourself as a teacher educator, generally, if this end is tradition and this end is innovation?

TRADITION \longleftrightarrow INNOVATION

AOSA Guidelines | Where would you position yourself as a teacher educator, generally, regarding AOSA Guidelines, if this end is you follow AOSA Guidelines exactly, and at this end, you're pedagogically flexible with your teaching choices—you use professional discretion/judgment?

AOSA Guidelines exactly \longleftrightarrow pedagogically flexible; use professional discretion

Past vs. Future Orientation | Where would you position yourself on this line of AOSA Teacher Education if this end is about maintaining historical practices and this end preparing for future needs?

Where should AOSA Teacher Education as a program be?

Maintaining historical practices \longleftrightarrow preparing for future needs

2) World Café

Round 1 (12 min)

Quick discussion and note-taking

Crystal and Eva at Station 1: How do we maintain quality while increasing access?

Mary and Max at Station 2: What should change/stay the same in Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education?

Round 2 (12 min)

Pairs swap tables/prompts → Build on previous notes

Mary and Max at Station 1: How do we maintain quality while increasing access?

Crystal and Eva at Station 2: What should change/stay the same in Orff Schulwerk
Teacher Education?

Round 3 (12 min)

All four participants gather at Station 3

Quick share-out from previous discussions

Full group discussion on final prompt: How do we build sustainable learning
communities? (10 minutes)

Final Synthesis (9 minutes):

Quick gallery walk; Give each person 3 sticky dots/marks to highlight the most important
points

Rapid-fire key takeaways; End with each person sharing their single biggest takeaway in
one sentence

APPENDIX D: Focus Group Protocol, Session 2

Session 2 | Examining Our Teacher Educator Practices (10:45–12:00)

3) Problem of Practice

Step 1: One person in the group shares a dilemma they experience/observe in Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education

Step 2: The group uses focus questions to narrow feedback; yes/no questions

Step 3: The group asks the person who shared a dilemma question they might need answered in order to brainstorm feedback

Step 4: The group discusses the dilemma

The group forms a circle and discusses possible answers to the focus questions. During group discussion the person who shared the dilemma is only supposed to listen. The idea here is to provide a “think tank” that is outside the brain of the sharer. The person who shared the dilemma should sit somewhere in the room that is not in the circle. They can listen and take notes, but they cannot talk.

Step 5: Reflection from the dilemma sharer

The person who shared the dilemma joins the circle and shares their impressions. What was useful? What new ideas emerged? How has their thinking changed from the moment they walked into the room today?

4) Success Analysis Protocol

Guiding Question: What strategies have successfully supported students struggling with notation/arrangement assignments in your courses?

Step 1: Success Strategy Sharing

Each TE shares

One specific intervention that worked

Context of the situation

Why they believe it was effective

Any adaptations made based on experience

Step 2: Collaborative Analysis

Group discussion:

Common elements across successful strategies

Resource requirements

Implementation timing

Adaptation possibilities

Step 3: Strategy Synthesis

Identify top 2 strategies to develop further

Note specific implementation requirements

APPENDIX E: Focus Group Protocol, Session 3

Session 3 | The Future of Orff Schulwerk (2:00–3:15)

5) Reimagining Music Education Through Orff Schulwerk

1. Opening Reflection (12 min)

As we think about transforming music education, consider how Orff Schulwerk's core principles could reshape our approach:

Key Questions:

How might Orff Schulwerk's emphasis on creative exploration and play address the need for culturally responsive teaching?

Where do you see Orff Schulwerk's collaborative processes opening new possibilities for diverse learning environments?

How might the Orff Schulwerk approach to elemental music making translate to digital/hybrid spaces?

What aspects of Orff Schulwerk could help reimagine how we develop tomorrow's musicians?

Write about:

A specific aspect of music education that needs reimagining

How Schulwerk principles could guide this transformation

What this transformed practice might look like

The potential impact on student musicianship and engagement

Now let's share and build on these visions...

2. Deep Dive Discussions (30 min)

Each participant (10 min):

Share vision (2–3 min)

Facilitate discussion (7–8 min)

Discussion Framework:

a) Initial Sharing

Describe the aspect of music education needing transformation

Explain which Schulwerk principles could guide this change

Share a concrete example or scenario

b) Guided Dialogue:

Where do you see connections to your own vision for transformation?

How does this reimagining honor Schulwerk while pushing boundaries?

What excites you about this possibility?

What challenges might we need to address?

c) Building Together:

Each colleague adds one way to extend or strengthen the vision

Identify potential first steps or pilot opportunities

Note connections to their own practice

Now let's see how these ideas connect...

3. Collective Vision (20 min)

Together, let's map how Orff Schulwerk could transform music education.

Visual Mapping Process:

a) Core Elements:

Place each person's key transformation in a triangle formation

Draw out essential Schulwerk principles driving each change

Identify overlapping principles

b) Connections & Impact:

Draw lines between related elements

Note potential synergies

Highlight broader implications for:

Student musicianship

Teacher preparation

Access and equity

Future of music education

c) Path Forward:

Identify 2–3 concrete next steps

Note required resources or support

Consider ways to share insights with broader community

Each person commits to one action step

As we close, let's consider our roles...

4. Final Reflection Round (10 min)

As we close, I'd like us to reflect on our roles as teacher educators in shaping Orff

Schulwerk's evolution.

One question at a time (5 min each); Each person responds briefly (1–2 min); Brief

crosstalk welcome if it emerges naturally

As you think about the transformations we've discussed, how do you decide when to preserve tradition versus catalyze change? Can you share a specific example of making this decision?

Where do you see your vision aligning with AOSA's direction? Where do you feel tension? How do you work within those tensions?

What helps you navigate these decisions as a teacher educator? What advice would you give to new Orff teacher educators about this?

APPENDIX F: One Month Later Reflection

1. What was the most surprising moment of insight for you during our focus group discussions? How did hearing colleagues' perspectives shift or expand your understanding of the role of teacher educator?
2. In what ways did participating in this focus group feel different from other professional development experiences? What made you feel safe or empowered to share more vulnerably about your professional challenges?
3. Reflecting on our collective conversations, what potential do you see for professional learning communities like this to create meaningful change in music education? What specific strategies or approaches emerged that you might implement in your own context?
4. How has this focus group experience influenced your perception of your role as a teacher educator? In what ways do you feel more connected, supported, or equipped to address challenges after our discussions?

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